



*Week of 2-8-16
Volume 16 | Issue 6*

Congressional Overview

The President issued his FY 17 budget on Tuesday; you can view his proposed budget electronically at www.govinfo.gov. Meanwhile, the Senate continued debate this week on its bipartisan energy bill. Finally, the House considered legislation on National Science Foundation grants, the federal debt and nutrition.

Obama Administration Pushing for New Workforce Training Funding

The Administration plans to ask Congress to approve \$2 billion in new funding to help communities with their efforts to prevent students from dropping out of high school and to get them into postsecondary education. The competitive grant program would be administered by the Departments of Labor and Education, and it would be awarded to communities that are in required partnerships with local education, workforce and community organizations. These departments would encourage proven approaches, such as work-based learning and internships, and re-engagement centers. The proposal is part of a broader \$5.5 billion package of ideas aimed at helping young people who are out of work and not in school to secure their first jobs. The administration is also seeking additional money to boost apprenticeship programs and improve data on workforce training program outcomes.

Flint Water Crisis Derails Senate Debate on Energy Bill

The Senate continued debate on its energy bill, which was derailed last week (and again this week) over funding for the Flint, Michigan drinking water crisis. Sens. Gary Peters (D-MI) and Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) want \$600 million for Flint, including \$400 million to match state funds to repair and replace old pipes in the city and the balance going to a research and education center on lead poisoning. Republican Senators have suggested that Democrats were trying to score political points regarding this funding.

Senate Passes New North Korea Sanctions

The Senate passed new sanctions cracking down on North Korea after the country said it successfully tested a hydrogen bomb. The Senate policy requires that the administration sanction anyone involved with North Korea's nuclear weapons program, arms-related materials, luxury goods, human rights abuses, activities that negatively impact cybersecurity and the use of coal or metals in any of the activities. Penalties would include freezing assets under U.S. jurisdiction, banning individuals from traveling to the United States or blocking government contracts.

House Passes Legislation to Establish Standards for National Science Foundation Research

The House passed legislation on Wednesday that would establish standards for National Science Foundation research grants to be "worthy of federal funding." Research projects would have to be "in the national interest" in order to qualify. The legislation was approved by a 263-178 vote that was largely along party lines.

House-Passed Bill Would Modify FDA's Menu-Labeling Rule for Restaurants

This week, the House passed a bill that would modify the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) menu-labeling rule for restaurants, which is expected to go into effect within the next year. The legislation would require disclosing the number of calories contained in a menu item, along with the number of calories per serving. Restaurant establishments with menu items that come in a variety of combinations would have flexibility in using nutrition disclosure methods approved by the FDA.

President Obama's FY 17 Budget Proposes \$10-Per-Barrel Tax

President Obama's FY 17 budget proposes a \$10-per-barrel tax on oil to pay for transportation improvements. The tax would increase annual funding for transportation by about \$20 billion above current spending levels. Republicans immediately denounced the tax as an assault on middle-class taxpayers. Speaker Paul Ryan (R-WI) stated, "As this lame-duck president knows, it's dead on arrival in Congress because House Republicans are committed to affordable American energy and a strong U.S. economy."

House Committee Chairmen Will Play Key Roles in Developing 2016 GOP Policy Agenda

On Monday, Speaker Ryan announced that all 20 chairmen of the standing legislative House committees will play lead roles in developing the 2016 GOP policy agenda. They will be divided into six task forces focusing on national security, a tax code rewrite, a healthcare overhaul, poverty and welfare, regulations and constitutional authority. The task forces will begin their work by scheduling listening sessions with members. The goal is for them to produce their ideas sometime this spring, in advance of the selection of a Republican presidential nominee.

House leaders have said they expect whoever the nominee, the candidate will want to embrace the House's agenda. The six task forces pick up the themes of Ryan's five-point agenda that he announced during the Republican retreat last month, but add a separate panel to look for ways to change the regulatory system, something the speaker had previously grouped with restoring the constitution and checking the power of the executive branch.

Pew Survey Finds Majority of U.S. Adults Think the Federal Government Doesn't Do Enough for the Middle Class

A Pew Research Center national survey of 1,500 adults (conducted Dec. 8-13, 2015) found that 62 percent of those surveyed said the federal government does not do enough for middle-class people. Of the remaining participants, 29 percent believed the federal government does the right amount, and six percent believed the government does too much. Since 2011, these views apparently have changed very little.

Neither political party has a clear edge when it comes to championing middle-class interests. Just 32 percent of the public said the Democratic Party favors the middle class and views of the Republican Party are much less balanced with a majority of the public (62 percent) saying that the GOP favors the rich, while 26 percent said it favors the middle class with just two percent saying the Republican Party favors the poor. Moreover, the nation's aggregate household income has substantially shifted from middle-income to upper-income households since 1970.

Per the survey, across class lines, those who identify as lower-middle or lower class are the most likely to say improving the job situation (71 percent) and reducing health care costs (70 percent) should be top priorities for Obama and Congress in 2016. When it comes to what it takes to be middle class, there is near unanimity in the public that a secure job and the ability to save money are essential for middle-class status. At the same time, there are sharp differences in opinion across classes regarding the availability of good jobs. Majorities of self-identified middle-class (58 percent) and lower-class adults (73 percent) say that good jobs are difficult to find, compared with only 46 percent of upper-class adults.