

## APPROPRIATIONS: FINANCIAL SERVICES

# Panel Likely to Debate Proposed Commission to Address National Debt

BY DAVID CLARKE, CQ STAFF WRITER

The House Appropriations Committee's markup Tuesday night will serve as a forum for the ongoing debate over whether Congress should create a special commission to address the long-term debt problems facing the government.

Rep. Frank R. Wolf, R-Va., plans to offer an amendment to the fiscal 2010 Financial Services appropriations bill that would create a commission or task force to draw up policy prescriptions for the government's long-term budget shortfalls. Congress would then have to vote on the recommendations.

The \$24.2 billion spending bill funds the Treasury Department and a host of other federal agencies.

Supporters of a fiscal commission argue that the new process would force Congress to deal with a politically treacherous issue that may be too difficult, in their view, to be handled through regular legislative means.

Last year, a similar amendment fell one vote short of being adopted, and it is likely to be defeated again, as Democrats, many of whom are opposed to the idea, now hold more seats on the Appropriations Committee.

But with debt levels on the rise and opinion polls showing the public increasingly worried about the deficit, the vote could be a difficult one for some lawmakers.

"You can't kick the can anymore," Wolf said. "We are at the end of the road."

The amendment is modeled after a bill (HR 1557) Wolf introduced with Jim Cooper, D-Tenn. The legislation has 69 cosponsors and has been praised by deficit hawk groups. But Democratic leadership in both chambers — with the exception of House Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer of Maryland — do not support the bill, viewing it as an end run around the regular committee process.

Liberals are also wary of the proposal, believing that it could be used to weaken the social safety net provided by Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.

Last year, House Appropriations Chairman David R. Obey, D-Wis., argued that the amendment was outside the committee's jurisdiction and had no place in an annual spending bill. In a blistering critique,



Wolf proposes that a commission or task force draw up policy prescriptions to address long-term budget shortfalls.

he also said it would give too much power to outside experts and not enough to the Appropriations and tax-writing panels that deal with the details of the federal budget.

The full committee is taking up the draft spending bill Tuesday night with the hope of having it on the floor toward the end of next week. The bill would provide about 7 percent more than was provided in fiscal 2009, but slightly less than the Obama administration requested. The bill covers the Treasury Department, the judiciary, the White House, the Small Business Administration, the District of Columbia and several smaller agencies.

The District's budget is usually a hot topic for debate. Rep. José E. Serrano, D-N.Y., chairman of the Financial Services Appropriations Subcommittee, said he wants to give city leaders more autonomy by attaching few strings to the District's funding.

On Monday, the group DC Vote, which supports congressional voting rights for the District, said it is lobbying against a possible Republican amendment to the spending bill that would weaken D.C. gun control laws.

Republicans may also target other D.C.-related provisions in the bill, such as a school voucher program that is a favorite of conservatives. The program would receive only enough funding to cover students already enrolled in the program, in line with the administration's request.

Serrano touted the bill, which the subcommittee approved on June 25, as providing needed funding boosts for agencies designed to keep an eye on the financial markets and protect consumers, such as the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Federal Trade Commission.

The bill would provide a sizable boost in funding for the IRS, which would receive \$12.1 billion, or 4.5 percent, more than it received in fiscal 2009. Most of that increase would go toward enforcement activities, but the independent IRS Oversight Board released a report Monday recommending that about \$360 million more be provided for the agency to improve information technology systems and to provide better service to taxpayers. ♦

*The markup is scheduled for 7 p.m. Tuesday in 2359 Rayburn.*

**HILL FACTS**

**Did You Know?**

In 1983, while working as a White House aide, Rep. **Fred Upton**, R-Mich., proposed to his wife during a Baltimore Orioles baseball game, hiring an airplane to fly overhead with a banner reading, "Amey this is the inning to say yes."