

Congress approves biomedical bill as leaders eye adjournment

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Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Ky. speaks to the media after the Republican policy luncheon on Capitol Hill in Washington, Tuesday, Dec. 6, 2016. From left are, Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss., Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., McConnell, Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., Sen. John Thune, R-S.D., and Senate Majority Whip John Cornyn of Texas. (AP Photo/Sait Serkan Gurbuz)

With an atypical burst of bipartisanship, the Senate shipped legislation to President Barack Obama on Wednesday lowering hurdles for

government drug approvals as the 114th Congress bumped toward the end of a two-year run highlighted by upheaval and stalemate.

A week after the House easily approved the biomedical bill, senators passed it by a similarly overwhelming 94-5 margin. That was testament to a package that plans spending \$6.3 billion over the next decade on popular efforts like cancer research and battling drug addiction.

"This is a reminder of what we can do when we look out for one another," Obama said in a written statement that promised his signature. Referring to families that have endured losses to cancer, Alzheimer's and drug abuse, he added, "Their heartbreak is real, and so we have a responsibility to respond with real solutions. This bill will make a big difference."

"This is an opportunity we cannot miss, and we're not going to miss it," said Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., chairman of the Senate health committee.

Before adjournment, which leaders targeted for later this week, lawmakers were also tackling bills financing government agencies into late April, mapping Pentagon programs and planning water projects.

In a chamber where senators can flash barely concealed animosity, they showed their more gracious side with speeches lauding departing colleagues including Sens. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., and Kelly Ayotte, R-N.H. The Senate floor was also the stage for accolades to departing Vice President Joe Biden, who served 36 years as a Democratic senator from Delaware.

"You've been a real friend, you've been a trusted partner and it's been an honor to serve with you," Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said to Biden, who presided over the tribute.



Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid of Nev., flanked by Senate Minority Whip Richard Durbin of Ill., left, and Senate Minority Leader-elect Charles Schumer of N.Y., answers questions from the media after the Democratic policy luncheon on Capitol Hill in Washington, Tuesday, Dec. 6, 2016. (AP Photo/Sait Serkan Gurbuz)

That comradery was also reflected in the biomedical bill, which included a planned \$1.8 billion for [cancer research](#). Biden, whose 46-year-old son Beau succumbed to the disease last year, has championed such work.

That bill, which also takes steps to sharpen federal mental health programs, drew praise from scores of pharmaceutical, device and other medical industry associations and from numerous patients' groups.

It was opposed by consumer organizations and liberals who said the

measure's shortcuts for Food and Drug Administration approvals would endanger consumers and represented a sellout to drug makers. They also complained that it will take later legislation for Congress to provide the funds the bill envisions.

"Congress should not have had to jeopardize patient safety to increase medical research funding," said Michael Carome, director of Public Citizen's Health Research Group.

The drug bill was a cooperative capstone to a Congress that has seen its share of tumult.

A conservative rebellion booted Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, from office last year. Democrats staged an overnight sit-in on the House floor protesting the GOP-led Congress' inaction on gun control. Senate Republicans refused to let Obama fill a Supreme Court vacancy after Justice Antonin Scalia died last February.

The two parties gridlocked over easing trade barriers with Pacific Ocean nations and revamping criminal justice statutes, and in a prelude to next year's battles, Obama vetoed a repeal of his health care law. It took months for lawmakers to approve money to combat the Zika virus.



In this Nov. 14, 2016 file photo, members of the New York Police Department's counterterrorism unit guard Trump Tower in New York. New York City's mayor and other Democratic officials say Congress is coming up far too short in proposing to reimburse the city \$7 million for protecting Trump Tower. Mayor Bill de Blasio said Wednesday, Dec. 7, 2016, that New York City taxpayers "should not be on the hook for 80 percent of the national bill" to protect Republican President-elect Donald Trump and his family. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan, File)

Congress did extend dozens of minor tax breaks for individuals and businesses, reshaped how Medicare reimburses doctors and rewrote federal education and transportation programs.

Before adjourning, lawmakers still needed to approve government-wide spending legislation. It contained money to keep agencies functioning into next spring, when the new President Donald Trump and GOP-run Congress would make final budget decisions.

It included \$4.1 billion in disaster aid for Louisiana and other states, \$170 million to help Flint, Michigan, rebuild its lead-poisoned water system and other funds for U.S. anti-terrorism operations overseas. It also contained a provision to help former Gen. James Mattis become Trump's Defense secretary by making it easier for Congress next year to waive the required seven-year wait before military retirees can head the Pentagon.

No one was expecting the bill to fail—which would produce a Friday night government shutdown—but there were lingering disputes to resolve.

These included complaints from coal country lawmakers that the measure insufficiently extended health care benefits for 16,000 retired mine workers, whose coverage is slated to end Dec. 31. Democrats were unhappy the bill provided just \$7 million of the \$35 million the Obama administration requested to beef up security in midtown Manhattan, home to President-elect Donald Trump.

By 92-7, the Senate gave preliminary approval to a defense policy bill that would block Obama from his goal of shuttering the military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

A \$558-million water-projects bill was in jeopardy, due to a fight over spending for California that pitted agricultural against environmental interests.

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