

Senate votes to move bill speeding federal drug OKs

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Vice President Joe Biden waves as he concludes his speech about sound financial sector regulation at Georgetown University in Washington, Monday, Dec. 5, 2016. (AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta)

The Senate moved Monday toward removing the last hurdles to legislation bolstering disease research and simplifying the government's pathway for pharmaceutical and medical device approvals as a Congress marked by frequent battles with President Barack Obama prepared to close out its business with a bipartisan accord.

With an emotional Vice President Joe Biden presiding over the chamber where he served for 36 years, senators began voting to end delaying tactics against the biomedical measure and were expected to easily get the 60 votes needed to do so. The \$6.3 billion the biomedical bill envisions providing over the next decade includes \$1.8 billion for cancer research, and Obama has placed Biden in charge of a "moonshot" to find ways to cure and treat the disease, which killed his son Beau last year.

Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., sought approval for renaming a portion of the bill after

Beau Biden. The Senate agreed, and lawmakers of both parties applauded and lined up to share quiet words and pats on the shoulder with the vice president, who sat teary-eyed in the presiding officer's chair. A clerk handed Biden a tissue.

Monday's vote would push the bill to the brink of final congressional approval, which might come Tuesday. The near 1,000-page package, which cleared the House overwhelmingly last Wednesday with backing from Obama, would also steer funds to battling drug abuse and overhauling federal mental health programs.

"It's legislation that can have an impact on each of our states and each of our constituents," said Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.

Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., serving his final days in the chamber, praised parts of the bill and cited regrets that it wasn't more generous but added, "I've been around a long time and I understand what legislation is all about."

Lawmakers were hoping to adjourn for the year by week's end, clearing the decks of legislation under Obama's presidency for a 2017 that will see Donald Trump in the White House and Republicans in control of the 115th Congress. The outgoing Congress and Obama have fought over the budget and health care, with each side frequently thwarting the other's priorities.

Congress' top priority for the week was approving legislation to keep the government functioning into next spring, when the new president and GOP lawmakers could put their stamp on budget priorities.

While the vice president is the Senate's official presiding officer, he seldom appears to actually oversee the chamber's business.

But Biden's presence could also help limit

Democratic opposition to the legislation. Among its critics were Sens. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., and Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., who are trying to tug the party in a more liberal direction following its Election Day drubbing.

Sanders and Warren were among those complaining the measure would make it easier for the pharmaceutical and medical device industries—strong supporters of the legislation—to win federal approval for their products while raising risks to consumers. There was also anger that while the bill would require subsequent legislation by Congress to actually provide the money, it would lock in savings including cuts in a public health program created by Obama's health care law.

Overall, the legislation maps spending \$4.8 billion over the next 10 years for research by the National Institutes of Health, including a pair of Obama priorities: work on brain diseases and developing personalized medical treatments. McConnell has backed provisions supporting efforts to use adult stem cells to regenerate cells.

The bill plans state grants worth \$1 billion over the next two years for preventing and treating abuse of addictive drugs like opioids and heroin. And it would establish new positions within the Department of Health and Human Services to coordinate anti-drug efforts, but without much additional money.

To the chagrin of consumer groups, the bill lets the Food and Drug Administration use data summaries—instead of more detailed information—when considering whether to approve existing drugs for new uses. It allows the agency to approve drugs aimed at life-threatening infections based on test results from smaller numbers of patients.

Republicans planned to unveil legislation Tuesday to keep federal agencies functioning into early next year. That would give the next Congress and the incoming Trump administration time to approve more than \$1 trillion for federal agencies through Sept. 30, when the government's budget year ends.

Current spending expires at midnight Friday. Since

the measure is the only must-do bill before Congress adjourns, it's likely to carry several additions.

They include \$170 million to help Flint, Michigan, repair its aging, lead-poisoned water system. Other items include about \$4 billion to help Louisiana and other states rebuild from floods and other natural disasters, and money to partially meet the Obama administration's \$11.6 billion request for war-related money.

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