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## White House proposes \$6.5 billion more in spending cuts

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The White House proposed Thursday to trim an additional \$6.5 billion from federal programs this year as Vice President Biden opened talks with congressional leaders aimed at funding the government through Sept. 30 and averting a shutdown.

With another deadline looming in two weeks, Biden carried the offer to Capitol Hill, where Republicans are demanding sharp and immediate cuts in spending to fulfill a campaign pledge to conservative voters who swept them to power in the House last fall.

The White House proposal falls far short of the \$61 billion the House voted last month to slash from current funding levels. But senior administration officials characterized it as an opening bid in a process that is likely to stretch on for days.

"We're willing to cut further if we can find common ground on a budget that we think reduces spending in the right way while protecting our investments in education, innovation and research," White House economic adviser Gene B. Sperling told reporters.

At the Capitol, Biden, White House chief of staff William M. Daley and budget director Jacob J. Lew met for about an hour with top Republican leaders - Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (Ky.) and House Speaker John A. Boehner (Ohio) - as well as Senate Majority Leader Harry M. Reid (D-Nev.) and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.).

None would comment as they emerged shortly after 5 p.m. from Biden's ceremonial office just off the Senate floor. Biden later issued a statement, saying, "We had a good meeting, and the conversation will continue."

No further meetings have been scheduled. Congressional sources said the next step is to take two spending bills to the Senate floor early next week. One will be the House-passed bill, which contains hundreds of provisions that are anathema to Democrats, including proposals to cut off funding for Planned Parenthood and to gut federal authority to regulate clean air and water. The other will be the Democratic alternative that outlines the \$6.5 billion in cuts the White House offered Thursday.

Both measures are expected to fall short of the 60 votes necessary to avert a filibuster. Aides in both parties said that would be progress: Failure in the Senate would show that neither plan is workable and that a compromise is needed. Democratic leaders could then press reluctant liberals to support additional spending cuts. And Republican leaders would have fresh leverage with the independent-minded bloc of House conservatives who forced them to pursue far more ambitious cuts than were first proposed.

The maneuvering came one day after President Obama signed a stopgap measure that averted a government shutdown this weekend. With the parties embroiled in an increasingly bitter fight over how best to reduce record budget deficits, Congress has been unable to approve any formal spending bills and has been forced to

keep the government open through a series of temporary measures.

Republicans are insisting that even the temporary bills contain cuts. The measure signed into law Wednesday will fund federal agencies at current levels through March 18, while slicing \$4 billion from eight programs that Obama has identified as duplicative or unnecessary and more than 50 local projects requested by individual lawmakers, otherwise known as earmarks.

Policymakers are wrestling with a plan to finance the government through the final 6 1/2 months of the fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30. Republicans want cuts at a rate of \$2 billion a week, an unprecedented reduction in spending that Democrats say would destroy jobs and imperil the economic recovery.

Sperling declined to detail the \$6.5 billion in additional cuts the White House offered Thursday. A source with knowledge of the talks said they were pulled from a list of program terminations and reductions Obama proposed in the fiscal 2012 budget request he submitted to Congress last month.

With the offer, Sperling argued that the White House had met Republicans "halfway" toward their goal of cutting \$100 billion off Obama's budget request for the current fiscal year. Democrats had already agreed to knock about \$40 billion off Obama's request when they approved the plan that funded the government through March 4. The new funding bill wipes out an additional \$4 billion in spending. Add the latest offer, and Democrats are up to \$51 billion, Sperling said - halfway to the \$100 billion Republicans promised.

Republicans, however, view most of those reductions as water under the bridge and are focused on actual reductions from current spending levels. By that measure, Democrats have offered only \$10.5 billion in cuts, compared with the \$61 billion GOP plan.

In the House, some Republican freshmen said they would dig in to defend their cuts. "If the government were to shut down, I don't think it's because we asked for too much," said Rep. Scott DesJarlais (Tenn.), noting that the GOP plan would cut less than "one-sixteenth" of the \$1.6 trillion budget deficit projected for this year.

Other Republicans were willing to contemplate a compromise but said it was unclear how far they can go without losing support from freshmen such as DesJarlais.

"I'm sure there is" an acceptable compromise out there, said Rep. Mike Simpson (Idaho), a senior member of the House Appropriations Committee. "But nobody knows what it is yet."

*Staff writer Felicia Sonmez contributed to this report.*

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