

World News Roundup

COVID-19

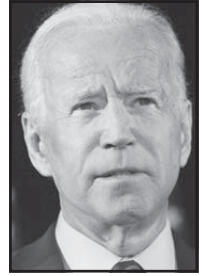
'American Rescue Plan'

Highlights of \$1.9t COVID bill nearing 'final passage'

WASHINGTON, March 7, (AP): The Senate approved a sweeping pandemic relief package over Republican opposition on Saturday, moving President Joe Biden closer to a milestone political victory that would provide \$1,400 checks for most American and direct billions of dollars to schools, state and local governments, and businesses.

The bill cleared by a party-line vote of 50-49 after a marathon overnight voting session and now heads back to the House for final passage, which could come early next week.

Democrats said their "American Rescue Plan" would help the country defeat the virus and nurse the economy back to health. Republicans criticized the \$1.9 trillion package as more expensive than necessary. The measure follows five earlier virus bills totaling about \$4 trillion that Congress has enacted since last spring.



Biden

A look at some highlights of the legislation:

Aid to the unemployed

Expanded unemployment benefits from the federal government would be extended through Sept. 6 at \$300 a week. That's on top of what beneficiaries are getting through their state unemployment insurance program. The first \$10,200 of jobless benefits would be non-taxable for households with incomes under \$150,000.

Additionally, the measure provides a 100% subsidy of COBRA health insurance premiums to ensure that the laid-off workers can remain on their employer health plans at no cost through the end of September.

More checks

The legislation provides a direct payment of \$1,400 for a single taxpayer, or \$2,800 for a married couple that files jointly, plus \$1,400 per dependent. Individuals earning up to \$75,000 would get the full amount, as would married couples with incomes up to \$150,000.

The size of the check would shrink for those making slightly more, with a hard cut-off at \$80,000 for individuals and \$160,000 for married couples.

Most Americans will be getting the full amount. The median household income was \$68,703 in 2019, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Money for state and local governments

The legislation would send \$350 billion to state and local governments and tribal governments for costs incurred up until the end of 2024. The bill also requires that small states get at least the amount they received under virus legislation that Congress passed last March.

Many communities have taken hits to their tax base during the pandemic, but the impact varies from state to state and from town to town. Critics say the funding is not appropriately targeted and is far more than necessary with billions of dollars allocated last spring to states and communities still unspent.

Aid to schools

The bill calls for about \$130 billion in additional help to schools for students in kindergarten through 12th grade. The money would be used to reduce class sizes and modify classrooms to enhance social distancing, install ventilation systems and purchase personal protective equipment. The money could also be used to increase the hiring of nurses and counselors and to provide summer school.

Spending for colleges and universities would be boosted by about \$40 billion, with the money used to defray an institution's pandemic-related expenses and to provide emergency aid to students to cover expenses such as food and housing and computer equipment.

Aid to businesses

A new program for restaurants and bars hurt by the pandemic would receive \$25 billion. The grants provide up to \$10 million per company with a limit of \$5 million per physical location. The grants can be used to cover payroll, rent, utilities and other operational expenses.

The bill also provides \$7.25 billion for the Paycheck Protection Program, a tiny fraction of what was allocated in previous legislation. The bill also allows more non-profits to apply for loans that are designed to help borrowers meet their payroll and operating costs and can potentially be forgiven.

Testing and vaccines

The bill provides \$46 billion to expand federal, state and local testing for COVID-19 and to enhance contract tracing capabilities with new investments to expand laboratory capacity and set up mobile testing units. It also contains about \$14 billion to speed up the distribution and administration of COVID-19 vaccines across the country.

Health care

Parts of the legislation advance longstanding Democratic priorities like increasing coverage under the Obama-era Affordable Care Act. Financial assistance for ACA premiums would become considerably more generous and a greater number of solid middle-class households would qualify. Though the sweetened subsidies last only through the end of 2022, they will lower the cost of coverage and are expected to boost the number of people enrolled.

The measure also dangles more money in front of a dozen states, mainly in the South, that have not yet taken up the Medicaid expansion that is available under the ACA to cover more low-income adults. Whether such a sweetener would be enough to start wearing down longstanding Republican opposition to Medicaid expansion is uncertain.

Bigger tax breaks for households with and without kids

Under current law, most taxpayers can reduce their federal income tax bill by up to \$2,000 per child. In a significant change, the bill would increase the tax break to \$3,000 for every child age 6 to 17 and \$3,600 for every child under the age of 6.

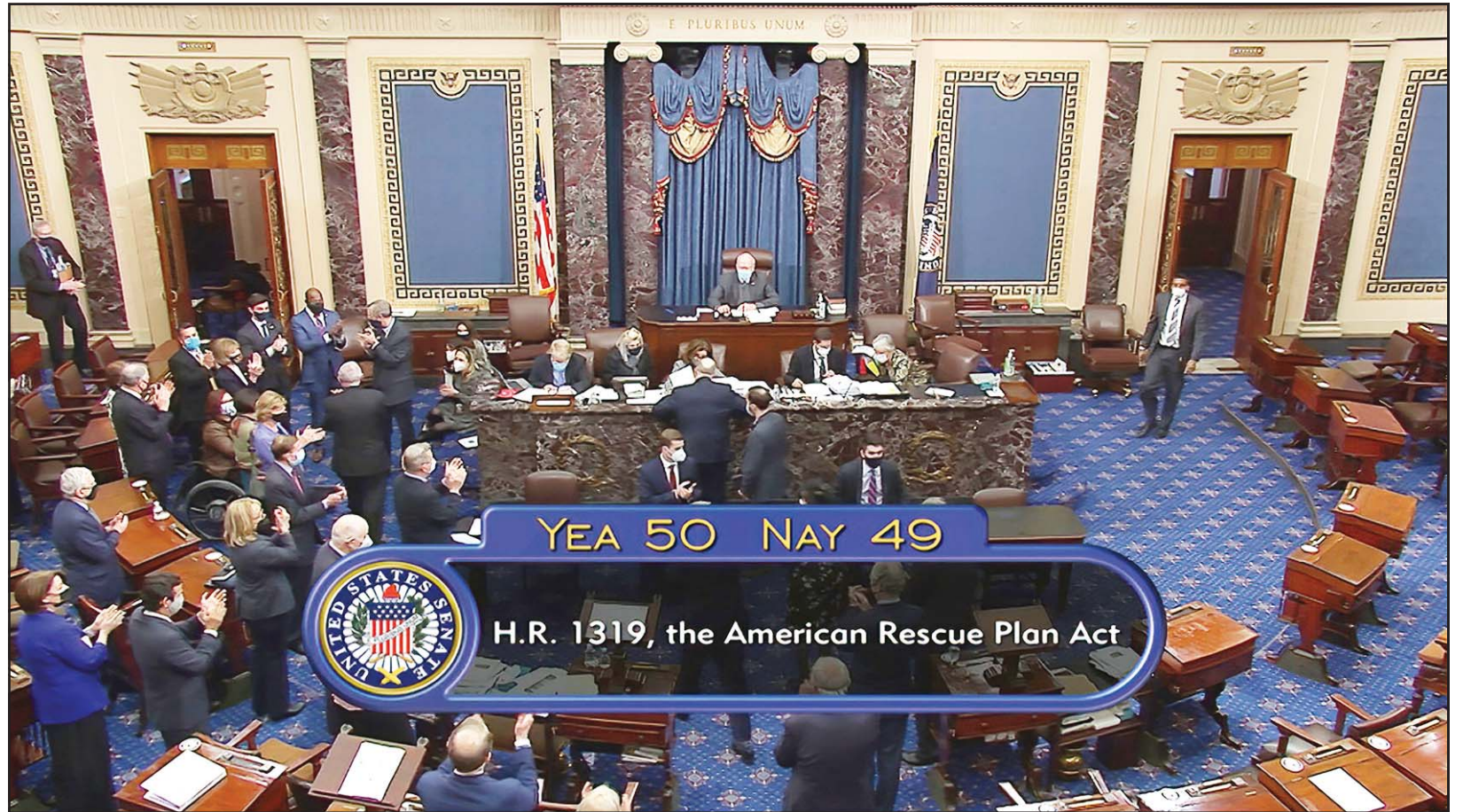
The legislation also calls for the payments to be delivered monthly instead of in a lump sum. If the secretary of the Treasury determines that isn't feasible, then the payments are to be made as frequently as possible.

Families would get the full credit regardless of how little they make in a year, leading to criticism that the changes would serve as a disincentive to work. Add in the \$1,400 checks and other items in the proposal, and the legislation would reduce the number of children living in poverty by more than half, according to the Center on Poverty and Social Policy at Columbia University.

The bill also significantly expands the Earned Income Tax Credit for 2021 by making it available to people without children. The credit for low and moderate-income adults would be worth \$543 to \$1,502, depending on income and filing status.

Rental And Homeowner Assistance

The bill provides about \$30 billion to help low-income households and the unemployed afford rent and utilities, and to assist the homeless with vouchers and other support. States and tribes would receive an additional \$10 billion for homeowners who are struggling with mortgage payments because of the pandemic.



In this image from video, the vote total of 50-49 on Senate passage of the COVID-19 relief bill, is displayed on screen in the Senate at the U.S. Capitol in Washington on March 6. (AP)

COVID-19

'Victory crucial for hoisting country out of pandemic'

Senate OKs \$1.9t virus relief bill

WASHINGTON, March 7, (AP): An exhausted Senate narrowly approved a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill Saturday as President Joe Biden and his Democratic allies notched a victory they called crucial for hoisting the country out of the pandemic and economic doldrums.

After laboring all night on a mountain of amendments — nearly all from Republicans and rejected — bleary-eyed senators approved the sprawling package on a 50-49 party-line vote. That sets up final congressional approval by the House next week so lawmakers can whisk it to Biden for his signature.

The huge measure — its cost is nearly one-tenth the size of the entire U.S. economy — is Biden's biggest early priority. It stands as his formula for addressing the deadly virus and a limping economy, twin crises that have afflicted the country for a year.

"This nation has suffered too much for much too long," Biden told reporters at the White House after the vote. "And everything in this package is designed to relieve the suffering and to meet the most urgent needs of the nation, and put us in a better position to prevail."

Saturday's vote was also a crucial political moment for Biden and Democrats, who need nothing short of party unanimity in a 50-50 Senate they run with Vice President Kamala Harris' tiebreaking vote. They hold a slim 10-vote House edge.

Bill

Not one Republican backed the bill in the Senate or when it initially passed the House, underscoring the barbed partisan environment that's characterized the early days of Biden's presidency.

A small but pivotal band of moderate Democrats leveraged changes in the legislation that incensed progressives, hardly helping Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., guide the measure through the House. But rejection of their first, signature bill was not an option for Democrats, who face two years of running Congress with virtually no room for error.

In a significant sign, the chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, representing around 100 House liberals, called the Senate's weakening of some provisions "bad policy and bad politics" but "relatively minor concessions." Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., said the bill retained its "core bold, progressive elements."

"They feel like we do, we have to get this done," Senate Majority Leader

Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said of the House. He added, "It's not going to be everything everyone wants. No bill is."

In a written statement, Pelosi invited Republicans "to join us in recognition of the devastating reality of this vicious virus and economic crisis and of the need for decisive action."

The bill provides direct payments of up to \$1,400 for most Americans and extended emergency unemployment benefits. There are vast piles of spending for COVID-19 vaccines and testing, states and cities, schools and ailing industries, along with tax breaks to help lower-earning people, families with children and consumers buying health insurance.

Republicans call the measure a wasteful spending spree for Democrats' liberal allies that ignores recent indications that the pandemic and economy was turning the corner.

"The Senate has never spent \$2 trillion in a more haphazard way," said Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky. He said Democrats' "top priority wasn't pandemic relief. It was their Washington wish list."

Amendments

The Senate commenced a dreaded "vote-a-rama" — a continuous series of votes on amendments — shortly before midnight Friday, and by its end around noon dispensed with about three dozen. The Senate had been in session since 9 a.m. EST Friday.

Overnight, the chamber looked like an experiment in sleep deprivation. Several lawmakers appeared to rest their eyes or doze at their desks, often burying their faces in their hands. At one point, Sen. Brian Schatz, D-Hawaii, at 48 one of the younger senators, trotted into the chamber and did a prolonged stretch.

Sen. Dan Sullivan, R-Alaska, missed the votes to attend his father-in-law's funeral.

The measure follows five earlier ones totaling about \$4 trillion enacted since last spring and comes amid signs of a potential turnaround.

Vaccine supplies are growing, deaths and caseloads have eased but remain frighteningly high, and hiring was surprisingly strong last month, though the economy remains 10 million jobs smaller than pre-pandemic levels.

The Senate package was delayed repeatedly as Democrats made eleven-hour changes aimed at balancing demands by their competing moderate and progressive factions.

Work on the bill ground to a halt Fri-

day after an agreement among Democrats on extending emergency jobless benefits seemed to collapse. Nearly 12 hours later, top Democrats and West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, perhaps the chamber's most conservative Democrat, said they had a deal, and the Senate approved it on a party-line 50-49 vote.

Under their compromise, \$300 weekly emergency unemployment checks — on top of regular state benefits — would be renewed, with a final payment Sept. 6. There would also be tax breaks on some of that aid, helping people the pandemic abruptly tossed out of jobs and risked tax penalties on the benefits.

Benefits

The House relief bill, largely similar to the Senate's, provided \$400 weekly benefits through August. The current \$300 per week payments expire March 14, and Democrats want the bill on Biden's desk by then to avert a lapse.

Manchin and Republicans have asserted that higher jobless benefits discourage people from returning to work, a rationale most Democrats and many economists reject.

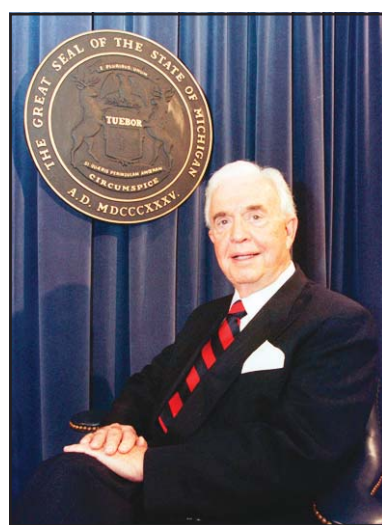
The agreement on jobless benefits wasn't the only move that showed moderates' sway.

The Senate voted Friday to eject a House-approved boost in the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour by 2025, a major defeat for progressives. Eight Democrats opposed the increase, suggesting that Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., and other liberals pledging to continue the effort will face a difficult fight.

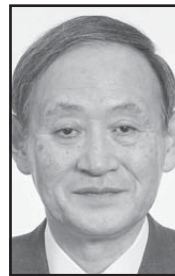
Party leaders also agreed to restrict eligibility for the \$1,400 stimulus checks for most Americans. That amount would be gradually reduced until, under the Senate bill, it reaches zero for people earning \$80,000 and couples making \$160,000. Those ceilings were higher in the House version.

Many of the rejected GOP amendments were either attempts to force Democrats to cast politically awkward votes or for Republicans to demonstrate their zeal for issues that appeal to their voters.

These included defeated efforts to bar funds from going to schools that don't reopen their doors or let transgender students born male participate in female sports. One amendment would have blocked aid to so-called sanctuary cities, where local authorities don't help federal officials round up immigrants in the U.S. illegally.



In this Dec. 16, 1998 file photo, Attorney General Frank J. Kelley speaks during an interview about his retirement at the end of the year in his Lansing, Michigan office. Kelley, affectionately called the 'eternal general' for his 37 years as Michigan's longest-serving attorney general, has died at age 96, his family said on March 6. Kelley, a Democrat, served from 1961 to 1999, winning statewide election 10 times. He moved to Naples, Florida, in 2020 and died Friday night, spokesman Chris De Witt said. (AP)



Suga



Jong Un

Asia

Japan extends 'emergency': Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga announced that his government is extending a state of emergency in the Tokyo region for another two weeks because its medical systems are still strained by COVID-19 patients.

At a government coronavirus taskforce meeting Friday night, Suga said the emergency will be extended through March 21 for Tokyo and three neighboring prefectures, where the measure was to end Sunday.

He said medical systems in the region were still burdened with COVID-19 patients and more hospital beds have to be freed. Infections have slowed significantly, but not enough, and the pace of decline has stalled, he said. "There is a strong concern of a rebound," he said.

Suga declared a month-long emergency on Jan 7 for Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama and Chiba that was later extended through March 7. An emergency that applied to other urban prefectures was lifted last week, underscoring the government's eagerness to allow businesses to return to normal as soon as possible.

The state of emergency, which is a non-binding request, centers around asking restaurants, bars and other businesses to voluntarily close at 8 p.m. Japan has never had a mandatory lockdown but has managed to keep infections relatively low with social distancing and other voluntary measures.

Controlling the spread of the virus, along with progress in vaccinations, are considered key for Tokyo's hosting of the Summer Olympics, already delayed by one year because of the virus and due to start July 23. (AP)

S.Korea, US scale back drills: The South Korean and U.S. militaries are scaling back their annual exercises this month due to the COVID-19 pandemic and to support diplomacy focusing on North Korea's nuclear program, officials said Sunday.

Seoul's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement that the allies decided to start the nine-day drills on Monday after reviewing factors like the status of the pandemic and diplomatic efforts to achieve denuclearization and peace on the Korean Peninsula.

It said the drills are defensive in nature and are mostly tabletop exercises and simulations that won't involve field training.

Last year, the allies canceled their spring-time drills after some of their troops were infected with the coronavirus. In recent years, the countries have also suspended or

downsized many of their regular training to create more space for the now-stalled U.S.-led diplomatic drive to convince North Korea to denuclearize in return for economic and political incentives.

U.S.-South Korea drills have been a major source of animosities on the peninsula, with North Korea viewing them as invasion rehearsals and responding with its own weapons tests. In January, North Korean



The sun rises behind the buildings of the banking district in Frankfurt, Germany on March 6. (AP)

leader Kim Jong Un urged the US to withdraw its hostile policy and South Korea to end drills with the U.S., warning the fate of their relations with North Korea depends on how they behave. (AP)

UN envoy urges action: The escalation of violence in Myanmar as authorities crack down on protests against the Feb. 1 coup is raising pressure for more sanctions against the junta, even as countries struggle over how to best sway military leaders inured to global condemnation.

The challenge is made doubly difficult by fears of harming ordinary citizens who were already suffering from an economic slump worsened by the pandemic but are braving risks of arrest and injury to voice outrage over the military takeover. Still, activists and experts say there are ways to ramp up pressure on the regime, especially by cutting off sources of funding and access to the tools of repression.

The UN special envoy on Friday urged the Security Council to act to quell junta violence that this week killed about 50 demonstrators and injured scores more.

"There is an urgency for collective action," Christine Schraner Burgener told the meeting. "How much more can we allow the Myanmar military to get away with?" (AP)