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House approves transportation, housing measure

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 ANDREW TAYLOR
 Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) -- The GOP-controlled House on Tuesday passed a huge bill providing money for transportation and housing programs despite protests from Democrats that the \$105 billion measure shortchanges transit projects, Amtrak and rent subsidies for the poor.

The House passed the bill on a 229-192 vote, capping a busy day as lawmakers worked their way through the annual spending bills funding line-by-line agency budgets. It came hours after the Democratic-led Senate Appropriations Committee unveiled a \$158 billion measure funding the departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education.

The Senate measure more than doubles, to \$1.9 billion, funding to care for the wave of unaccompanied immigrant children fleeing drug and gang violence in Central American countries like Guatemala and El Salvador. It also adds money for health research, Head Start and child care grants, as well as reviews of Social Security disability claims.

A Senate subcommittee approved the measure by voice vote, though Republicans oppose it for funding implementation of the new health care law. It rejects administration-sought cuts to heating aid and grants to nonprofit community action agencies that help the poor, and awards a sizable increase to community health centers.

And on Tuesday morning House panels gave back-to-back bipartisan approval to both a \$570 billion Pentagon spending bill and a \$34 billion measure funding the Energy Department, water projects and the Pentagon's nuclear weapons program. In approving the energy and water measure, lawmakers restored almost \$1 billion in cuts proposed by the Obama administration to Army Corps of Engineers projects. The GOP-led panel also pared back renewable energy programs backed by Obama and his Democratic allies while boosting spending to maintain the government's stockpile of nuclear weapons.

The defense funding measure backed up the Pentagon's efforts to retire the A-10 Warthog, the close air support aircraft that has a strong constituency in Congress. Rep. Jack Kingston, R-Ga., had offered an amendment to save the plane, shifting \$339 million from other accounts to keep the aircraft operating. But the amendment failed by a 23-13 vote. The vote is far from the final word on the plane as the panel's actions put it at odds with the House Armed Services Committee and the Senate.

The frenzy of activity involves the approximately \$1.1 trillion portion of the federal budget that's funded annually through 12 appropriations bills. These so-called discretionary programs would essentially be frozen at current levels, but as a practical matter face cuts as lawmakers deal with a spike in costs to care for unaccompanied immigrant children, battle Western wildfires and provide health care for veterans. A nearly \$3 billion drop in Federal Housing Administration receipts -- which are used to pay for spending elsewhere in the transportation and housing bill -- has created problems not just for that measure but is having ripple effects through each domestic bill.

While senior lawmakers like Senate Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., are promising to get the troubled appropriations process back on track this year, the challenges should not be discounted. Mikulski is employing accounting maneuvers to squeeze an additional several billion dollars into the measures, which is creating a mismatch between the House and Senate bills.

For instance, the spending increases in the Senate's labor, health, and education bill are paid for with \$2.4 billion in additional cuts to as-yet-unspecified programs. Such "changes in mandatory programs" often are a relatively pain-free way of squeezing money into spending bills and are typically met with skepticism from GOP budget hawks.

The transportation and housing measure offers a vivid illustration of the gap between the GOP House and Democratic Senate. Obama's Senate Democratic allies have added \$2.4 billion on top of the House measure, providing \$550 million for a transportation grant program that dates to Obama's 2009 stimulus bill, additional funding for rent vouchers for the poor and full funding of Obama's \$950 million request for the HOME program, which helps state and local governments build and rehabilitate affordable housing projects.

The House measure was opposed by most Democrats for shortchanging those programs. But the cuts were not as deep as last year, when the transportation and housing bill collapsed on the House floor.

"It provides inadequate funding for our country's highways and transportation infrastructure," said New York Rep. Nita Lowey, the top Democrat on the Appropriations Committee.

But Rep. Ed Pastor, D-Ariz., said the measure "is the best we can do" given the budget constraints facing lawmakers.

In two days of debate, the House made no significant changes to the bill. On Tuesday, Republicans jammed through an amendment by Jeff Denham, R-Calif., toughening a provision to block a controversial California high-speed rail projects. On Monday, Rep. Ted Poe, R-Texas, who represents a Houston district, backed off an attempt to strip out language by a crosstown rival, Rep. John Culberson, R-Texas, that effectively blocks construction of a light rail line on the city's west side.

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