

Congressional Closeup by William Jones

Differences remain on Clinton tax bill

The controversial BTU tax has all but disappeared from the negotiations being conducted by Senate Finance Committee Democrats, who huddled together June 10-11 to try to work out an alternative which would be acceptable to most Democrats. It appears that no options except the Republican option will be acceptable to Senate Republicans, who are intent on making as many waves as possible for the Clinton administration.

Although the BTU tax, meeting stiff opposition from oil state Sens. David Boren (D-Okla.) and J. Bennett Johnston (D-La.), was pretty much dead on arrival, the alternatives posed are no better. Among the proposed changes in the program are the elimination of \$15 billion in tax breaks, reducing or eliminating a planned \$7.1 billion increase in food stamp allocations over the next five years, and upwards of \$10 billion in cuts in health care entitlement programs, such as Medicare and Medicaid.

Boren has called for deep additional cuts in Medicare to make up for revenue lost by dropping the energy tax. But 11 Democrats who are not on the Finance Committee wrote a letter to Finance Committee Chairman Daniel Moynihan (D-N.Y.) saying that they would oppose any additional cuts in Medicare and Medicaid which would increase out-of-pocket costs for the elderly and poor, reduce access or quality of health care, or threaten enactment of health care overhaul.

Representatives of senior citizen groups, including the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), are warning that they will target any congressman who tries to force more cuts in entitlements. The Congressional Black Caucus, angry with President Clinton for dropping the nomination of Lani Guinier as head of the

Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, has also threatened to reject any package which would include significant cuts in welfare.

Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell (D-Me.) has nevertheless predicted that Finance Committee Democrats will come up with an acceptable compromise by June 18. But even within the administration there are considerable differences of opinion on the options. When Transportation Secretary Federico Pena voiced objections to a tax on transportation fuels as an alternative to the BTU tax, the White House made clear that Pena was expressing his own opinion or that of the transportation industry, and not that of the administration.

House passes arms aid for Bosnia

The House passed on June 17 the Foreign Assistance Authorization Act on a voice vote. The legislation included the "Bosnia-Herzegovina Self-Defense Act of 1993," the so-called Hyde Amendment introduced by Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), which authorizes the United States to unilaterally break the U.N. arms embargo against Bosnia and authorizes \$200 million in U.S. military assistance for that nation.

Action on the corresponding legislation in the Senate, which has been introduced by Sens. Bob Dole (R-Kan.) and Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), has been bogged down. It has yet to be taken up by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, where committee chairman Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.) opposes the legislation. Capitol Hill sources indicate that when (and if) it is taken up in committee, a fight will be required to push it through.

The victory in the House, however, could help force a number of senators to act who would like to punt on the issue, considering it as a criticism of the Clinton administration policy on Bosnia. The bill must pass the Senate before it has any effect.

In bringing the bill to a vote, assurances were given to House Armed Services Committee Chairman Ron Dellums (D-Calif.) that he would be permitted to select conferees for the conference committee that would work out any differences which might arise between the two bills. Dellums is opposed to the amendment.

Fight escalates over Space Station Freedom

In a hearing on June 8 to consider the fiscal year 1994 budget authorization for NASA, it was clear that the Congress was not at all inclined to go along with White House demands which might emasculate Space Station Freedom.

Three months ago White House science adviser John Gibbons requested that NASA do a redesign study, to try to limit spending on a Space Station budget from 1994 to 1998 to either \$5, \$7, or \$9 billion. Completing Space Station Freedom was projected to cost \$17-plus billion. Over \$11 billion has been spent on the program since its inception in 1984, and fabrication of hardware has already begun.

NASA Administrator Dan Goldin, accompanied by about a dozen NASA engineers who worked on the redesign options, presented the results to angry members of the House Science, Space, and Technology Committee's Subcommittee on Space, who do not want yet another design and more procrastination, but rather a completed space station. The options

developed by the redesign teams range from a single-launch, "man in the can," stripped-down station for \$11.9 billion, to an "improved" (i.e., cheaper) version of Space Station Freedom, for \$13.3 billion. None of the options came in within the \$9 billion spending ceiling Gibbons had given NASA.

When the report was released on June 7, Malcolm Peterson of the NASA Comptroller's Office simply stated that obtaining a permanent manned presence in space will cost "clearly more than \$9 billion."

Radon hoax gives rise to drastic legislation

Draft legislation is now in both houses of Congress which could deal a serious blow to homebuilding and to the capital budgets of school districts throughout the country, all in the name of protecting against the "threat" of radon exposure. The legislation is being rushed through in the next 60 to 90 days.

The Department of Energy has a radon research program, which shows that we are a long way from having enough data to say what legislation, if any, is required. Nevertheless, legislators are scampering desperately to put together a bill which is meant to deal with people's "fears" of the scare.

Details of the current bills are not yet known, but members of Congress have said in the recent past that a limit of 1 picocurie of radiation per liter of indoor air should be the limit. The Canadian limit is 20 picocuries. Meeting the 1 picocurie limit would cost about \$1 trillion.

The burden on the capital budgets of school districts could be consider-

able. In the previous scare over asbestos, it cost the school systems about \$150 billion to needlessly remove asbestos from their buildings. The National Education Association (NEA) and the National Parent Teachers Association (NPTA) are supporting the legislation, while the National School Boards Association is fighting it.

The Senate bills are S. 657, the "Indoor Radon Abatement Reauthorization Act," and S. 656, the "Indoor Air Quality Act," sponsored by Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.), John Chafee (R-R.I.), George Mitchell (D-Me.), Daniel Moynihan (D-N.Y.), Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.), and others. One is scheduled to be marked up at the end of June and the other at the end of July. The House companion piece to the legislation is being drafted by Edward Markey (D-Mass.) and Henry Waxman (D-Calif.).

Environmentalism attacked as economy worsens

In what is becoming an ever-more typical response these days on Capitol Hill as the economic crisis becomes acute, the environmentalist agenda is coming under increasing fire. In remarks on the floor of the Senate on June 7, Sen. Slade Gorton (R-Wash.) commented, "A strong economy is the cornerstone of a healthy environment."

"The environmental movement has been fueled, in part, by a new belief that industry and the environment are incompatible," Gorton said. "According to this theory, a healthy environment and a healthy economy are diametrically opposite. The presence of this tenet is particularly apparent in the Pacific Northwest, where, during the last five years, attempts have been

made to halt timber harvesting in the name of environmental protection. I do not subscribe to this philosophy. I believe, instead, that our challenge is not to choose between a healthy environment and a healthy economy, our challenge is to have both. I contend, and a review of environmental conditions in Third World countries confirms, that a strong economy is a cornerstone of a healthy environment."

Campaign finance reform blocked by filibuster

The Campaign Finance Bill, crafted by Democratic legislators, is being held up by Republicans, who have initiated a filibuster to stop the legislation. The bill would set voluntary spending limits on congressional campaigns—\$600,000 for House races and variable limits for Senate races, depending on the size of a state's population.

Republicans have been strengthened by the victory in Texas of State Treasurer Kay Hutchison over Paul Kruger, who was appointed by President Clinton to take Lloyd Bentsen's seat. The Democrats need 60 votes to invoke cloture and cut off debate, but hold only a 56-44 majority.

Republicans want to introduce amendments to the legislation which would reduce or eliminate entirely the financing of campaigns with public tax dollars. Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell (D-Me.) has threatened to shelve the legislation if a compromise is not worked out acceptable to enough Republicans to secure passage. "If we can't get cloture on campaign finance reform because Republicans succeed in their filibuster, the bill will be dead, and, of course, they'll be responsible for killing it," said Mitchell on June 14.