Pelosi names final members to debt supercommittee

ALAN FRAM - Associated Press - Associated Press

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi's appointment Thursday of three Democrats to Congress' new debt-reduction supercommittee completes the roster of a panel whose members are already being tugged in competing directions.

Pelosi selected Reps. James E. Clyburn of South Carolina and Xavier Becerra of California, who both are members of the party's House leadership, and Maryland's Chris Van Hollen, the top Democrat on the Budget Committee. The choices bring racial diversity to the supercommittee because Clyburn is black and Becerra is Hispanic.

The 12-member panel, divided evenly among Democrats and Republicans, has until Thanksgiving to propose $1.5 trillion in 10-year budget savings. If it does not propose a package or if Congress doesn't approve it, $1.2 trillion in automatic budget cuts will be triggered.

In a statement, Pelosi, D-Calif., said the supercommittee's goal should be "to grow an American prosperity enjoyed by all Americans." She said it should aim at producing jobs and economic growth that reduces budget deficits.

Complicating the panel's task are the economy's alarming stall, the chaos dominating financial markets and last week's historic downgrade of the government's credit rating. Next year's presidential and congressional elections will put added political pressures on the lawmakers.

Pelosi said that when Congress returns from recess next month, it should pass jobs legislation, including highway and aviation bills lawmakers have been working on.

Job creation legislation usually costs the government money and drives up short-term deficits.

Other congressional leaders had made their selections earlier this week.

Members of both parties said the job of whittling down the government's enormous debt was urgent, yet critics expressed little hope that the bipartisan panel would be able to overcome stark political divides.

Either way, deficit foes said the nation's growing red ink was so dangerous that the panel should double or triple the $1.5 trillion, 10-year savings goal set by the debt-limit compromise President Barack Obama and Congress enacted last week.

"It's not going to be simple to come to a deal," said Maya MacGuineas, president of

the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, which advocates balanced budgets and a larger package of savings.

She said greater debt-reduction would require addressing the entire budget, meaning both parties would have to yield — Republicans in their opposition to revenue increases and Democrats in their resistance to trimming benefits from Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.

On Wednesday, House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, named conservative Rep. Jeb Hensarling, R-Texas, a rising force among House Republicans, as GOP co-chairman of the powerful new panel. He also appointed House Ways and Means Chairman Dave Camp and House Energy and Commerce Chairman Fred Upton, a pair of veteran Michigan Republicans, to the committee.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., named confidant and No. 2 Senate GOP leader Jon Kyl of Arizona, tapping a lawmaker who is retiring in 2013 and is a solid conservative. He also appointed GOP Sen. Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania, elected last year with tea party backing, and fellow freshman Sen. Rob Portman of Ohio, a former budget director and trade representative for President George W. Bush who is viewed as a possible vice presidential pick next year.

On Tuesday, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., chose Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., who runs the Senate Democratic campaign arm, as Democratic co-chair of the debt committee. He also appointed 2004 Democratic presidential nominee and Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry, D-Mass., and Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, D-Mont., a centrist who strayed to back Bush's 2001 tax cuts.

Boehner said his appointees are trusted leaders "who understand the gravity of our debt crisis." He acknowledged the two sides' differences but said the committee provided an opportunity to "come together to do what's best for our country."

At the White House, spokesman Jay Carney said Obama expects members of the committee to "act seriously." He reiterated Obama's call for "a balanced approach," which means a mix of spending cuts and tax increases.

Yet critics noted that none of the Senate's so-called Gang of Six, a bipartisan group of senators who proposed trillions in spending cuts and tax boosts this year, was named to the panel. And while Baucus, Camp and Hensarling were members of the bipartisan deficit commission that Simpson headed with Democrat Erskine Bowles, critics pointed out that all three had opposed that group's final recommendations.

"I'm nervous that the far left and the far right are in here, and I don't see them being the ones" likeliest to strike a compromise, said G. William Hoagland, a former top GOP Senate aide who now lobbies for Cigna Corp.

With the panel split evenly between the two parties, seven of the 12 members will have to approve a debt-cutting plan before it can be sent to Congress for votes. That means at least one lawmaker would have to agree to a plan backed by the

opposite party.

While Baucus, Portman and Upton are widely viewed as among the more pragmatic lawmakers picked for the panel, critics said it was hard to imagine them abandoning their parties on such a high-profile issue. Hensarling and Toomey are considered two of Congress' most conservative members and the least likely to budge on tax increases. Kerry is a liberal who seems unlikely to consent to benefit cuts, while Kyl, Murray and Hensarling are party leaders in their chambers.

Underscoring the views that panel members bring to their new posts, Camp said in an interview Wednesday that raising taxes "would hurt our economy and our ability to create jobs."

"I think the focus needs to be in reducing spending," he said. "When you're in debt, you need to look at spending."

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