Shutdown drags into third week

Difference of opinion on spending stymies any progress on latest effort to reach a deal

By Donna Cassatta
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Senate Republicans and Democrats hit an impasse Sunday on spending in their last-ditch struggle to avoid an economy-jarring default in just four days and end a partial government shutdown that enters its third week.

After inconclusive talks between President Barack Obama and House Republicans, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell took charge in trying to end the crises, although a conversation Sunday afternoon failed to break the stalemate.

"I'm optimistic about the prospects for a positive conclusion to the issues before this country today," Reid said as the Senate wrapped up a rare Sunday session.

The two cagey negotiators are at loggerheads about Democratic demands to undo the automatic, across-the-board spending cuts to domestic and defense programs that Republicans see as crucial to reducing the nation's deficit.



Sen. Mitch McConnell



Sen. Harry Reid

McConnell insisted that a solution was readily available in the proposal from a bipartisan group of 12 senators, led by Republican Sen. Susan Collins and Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin, that would re-open the government and fund it at current levels for six months while raising the debt limit through Jan. 31.

"It's time for Democrat leaders to take 'yes' for an answer," McConnell said in a statement.

Politically, Republicans are reeling, bearing a substantial amount of the blame for the government shutdown and

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stalemate, according to recent polls.

McConnell and Republicans want to continue current spending at $986.7 billion and leave untouched the new round of cuts in January, commonly known as the sequester, that would reduce the amount to $967 billion. Democrats want to figure out a way to undo the reductions, plus a long-term extension of the debt limit increase and a short-term spending bill to reopen the government.

Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, the No. 2 Democrat in the Senate, said the sides were roughly $70 billion apart, the difference between the $1.058 trillion Senate budget amount and the $988 billion envisioned by House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan.

Republicans dismiss the latest request as Reid moving the goalposts in negotiations as they were getting closer to resolving the stalemate that has paralyzed Washington. They also argue that it is disingenuous for Democrats to resist any changes in the 3-year-old health care law while trying to undo the 2011 budget law that put the cuts on track.