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Bid for More Home Heating Aid Fails in Senate

By The Associated Press

The Senate decided yesterday the money was not there for a substantial spending boost for the federal home heating program, deflecting arguments that soaring energy prices could force the poor to choose between heat and food this winter.

Senators voted 54 to 43 in favor of a proposal to boost the fiscal 2006 budget for the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program from \$2.2 billion to \$5.1 billion. A 60-vote majority was needed to approve new spending not coupled with equivalent spending cuts.

Northern senators who pushed for increased spending for the program, led by Jack Reed (D-R.I.) and Susan Collins (R-Maine), argued that low-income families would be particularly hurt by the surge in fuel costs.

People could have to “choose between keeping the heat on, putting food on the table or buying much-needed prescription drugs,” Collins said. “No family should need to make such terrible choices.”

Reed cited estimates that those who heat their homes with fuel oil will need \$1,600 this winter, up \$380, and the cost of using natural gas for heating could rise \$500, to \$1,400.

The Senate also defeated, 53 to 46, an alternative put forward by Budget Committee Chairman Judd Gregg (R-N.H.) that would have increased spending on the program by about \$1.3 billion. The measure would have paid for the increase with an across-the-board cut of almost 1 percent in programs included in a \$146 billion spending bill covering health, education and labor programs.

Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) said that education grants for low-income children would be cut by \$118 million, affecting 37,000 youths, and that Head Start would lose \$63 million.

It was the third time this month that Reed unsuccessfully offered a LIHEAP amendment to a spending bill. He said he would keep trying.

The Senate rejected several other efforts to stretch the budget to obtain more money for popular programs. Sen. Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.) sought an extra \$5 billion for education grants for low-income children, and Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) wanted \$4 billion more for the Individuals with Disabilities Act.

Meanwhile, House Republicans voted to cut student loan subsidies, child support enforcement and aid to firms hurt by unfair trade practices as various committees scrambled to piece together \$50 billion in budget cuts.

More politically difficult votes — to cut Medicaid, food stamps and farm subsidies — are on tap today as more panels weigh in on the bill. It was originally intended to cut \$35 billion in spending over five years, but after pressure from conservatives, GOP leaders directed committees to cut an additional \$15 billion to help pay for hurricane recovery.

President Bush met with House and Senate GOP leaders and said he was pleased with the progress. He appeared to endorse a plan by House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) for an across-the-board cut in

agency budgets, perhaps including the Pentagon, by the end of the year.

Dozens of issues are at play as House and Senate Republicans cobble together the sprawling budget bill. The measure is the first in eight years to take aim at the automatic growth of federal spending programs such as Medicaid and Medicare.

The House Agriculture Committee announced a plan to cut the food stamp program by \$1 billion as part of a larger effort to slice \$4.2 billion from federal agriculture programs.

In the Senate, the Budget Committee voted along party lines to bundle together the work of eight legislative committees into a bill that will be debated next week by the full Senate. The Congressional Budget Office said the Senate measure would save \$39 billion over five years — \$4 billion more than the budget passed last spring.