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Womack Says Budget Decisions to Come After GOP Retreat

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Womack looks ahead to a tough election-year budget debate. (Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call file photo)

New House Budget Chairman **Steve Womack** plans an extensive review of the Congressional Budget Office this year, as well as an aggressive effort to make changes in the budget process.

Still up in the air is how ambitious the House fiscal 2019 budget resolution will be, or even whether the committee will mark up a tax and spending blueprint this year.

If the committee does not mark up a budget, it would be the first time the House has not adopted a budget since Republicans took control in the 2010 midterm elections.

Womack, R-Ark., told CQ he has to talk with committee Republicans as well as gauge the results of an upcoming House-Senate GOP retreat next week before any decisions are

made.

Womack described himself as a political realist who likes to achieve results rather than “doing something just based on optics.”

“If we’re going to spend our time and effort legislating, let’s make sure that what we’re doing has a better than average chance of getting across the finish line at some point, whether it’s all by ourselves or whether it’s in a bipartisan way,” he said.

Senate Budget Chairman **Michael B. Enzi** has not said whether he plans to bring a budget resolution before the committee. And there are big questions about whether the 51-49 GOP majority in that chamber can unite around a budget blueprint, especially in an election year.

“We need to have a CBO baseline and that’s still contingent on whatever happens out of the agreement on spending,” said Enzi, R-Wyo., referencing a still-elusive deal on appropriations limits. “So, I have no idea when that happens.”

The CBO usually publishes its baseline or projection of spending and revenue in January or February. The baseline may be delayed this year in part because of the challenge of estimating the impact of the tax bill passed last year.

In addition, lawmakers are waiting for congressional leaders and the White House to reach agreement on a deal to raise the discretionary spending caps for the current fiscal year and fiscal 2019. If Congress agrees to raise the fiscal 2019 spending caps, there would be little point in adopting a budget resolution that proposed different spending limits.

'Knee Jerk Reaction'

Womack said his “knee jerk reaction” to chances the Senate Budget Committee will mark up a budget is “slim to none.” He said he has spoken with Enzi about budgeting but did not suggest he was speaking for him. The Senate has adopted a budget every year since Republicans took control of the chamber in 2014.

“It’s an election year. You’ve finally got that trifecta there,” Womack said. He referred to Senate rules that generally require 60 votes for a bill to advance, lawmakers campaigning

for reelection, and what he called a lack of appetite “to confront something as challenging as the fiscal imbalance in America right now.”

Womack said he knows that some members of the House Budget Committee will want to advance a budget no matter what the Senate does.

“And there’s going to be mixed ideas in our conference about whether we do some messaging document or whether we really go out and try to do another reconciliation package where we can start again going after some of the long-term spending issues facing our country and advocating a response for it,” he said.

The committee already has scheduled an oversight hearing with CBO on Jan. 30, and Womack said at least two more hearings with CBO will follow that one. The Senate Budget Committee has its own hearing with CBO Director Keith Hall slotted for Wednesday at 10:30 a.m.

Womack also plans to pursue changes in the budget process, though not necessarily as sweeping as the **blueprint offered** by Georgia Republican **Tom Price** when he was budget chairman in 2016.

“We had a lot of great ideas but I’m kind of a — a football term — I’m a first downs guy,” he said. “I believe you got to take this thing in chunks, and you get what you can and then re-huddle and go after more.”

Womack also said he’s not ruling out the possibility of getting budget process changes through both the House and Senate, though he would not elaborate on specifics.

“I can’t speak for the Senate but I have a willing partner in Mike Enzi,” he said. “Mike wants to do it and where there’s a will there’s a way.”

Jennifer Shutt contributed to this report.

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