

Hill leaders to attend White House briefing on border



A closed sign is displayed at The National Archives entrance in Washington, Tuesday, Jan. 1, 2019, as a partial government shutdown stretches into its third week. A high-stakes move to reopen the government will be the first big battle between Nancy Pelosi and President Donald Trump as Democrats come into control of the House. (AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana)

WASHINGTON - Democratic and Republican congressional leaders are expected to attend a briefing on border security at the White House as the government remains partially shut down and President Donald Trump asks in a tweet, "Let's make a deal?"

The partial government shutdown began on Dec. 22. Funding for Trump's pet project, a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, has been the sticking point in passing budgets for several government departments.

The briefing is scheduled for Wednesday afternoon, the day before Democrats are to assume control of the House and end the Republican monopoly on government.

The exact agenda, however, was not immediately clear, according to a person

with knowledge of the briefing who was not authorized to speak publicly about the issue and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and the top incoming House Republicans — Kevin McCarthy of California and Steve Scalise of Louisiana — planned to attend, according to aides. The departing House speaker, Paul Ryan, was not expected.

House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi, who is expected to become speaker on Thursday, and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer planned to attend. Pelosi said Tuesday that Democrats would take action to “end the Trump Shutdown” by passing legislation Thursday to reopen government.

“We are giving the Republicans the opportunity to take yes for an answer,” she wrote in a letter to colleagues. “Senate Republicans have already supported this legislation, and if they reject it now, they will be fully complicit in chaos and destruction of the President’s third shutdown of his term.”

The White House invitation came Tuesday after House Democrats released their plan to re-open the government without approving money for a border wall — unveiling two bills to fund shuttered government agencies and put hundreds of thousands of federal workers back on the job. They planned to pass them as soon as the new Congress convenes Thursday.

Responding to the Democratic plan, White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders late Tuesday night called it a “non-starter” and said it won’t re-open the government “because it fails to secure the border and puts the needs of other countries above the needs of our own citizens.”

Trump spent the weekend saying Democrats should return to Washington to negotiate, firing off Twitter taunts. After aides suggested there would not necessarily be a traditional wall as Trump had described since his presidential campaign, Trump stated that he really still wanted to build a border wall.

On Tuesday morning, after tweeting a New Year’s message to “EVERYONE INCLUDING THE HATERS AND THE FAKE NEWS MEDIA,” Trump tweeted: “The Democrats, much as I suspected, have allocated no money for a new Wall. So imaginative! The problem is, without a Wall there can be no real Border Security.”

But he seemed to shift tactics later in the day, appealing to Pelosi. “Border Security and the Wall ‘thing’ and Shutdown is not where Nancy Pelosi wanted to start her tenure as Speaker! Let’s make a deal?” he tweeted.

Whether the Republican-led Senate would consider the Democratic bills — or if Trump would sign either into law — was unclear. McConnell spokesman Donald Stewart said Senate Republicans would not take action without Trump’s backing.

“It’s simple: The Senate is not going to send something to the president that he won’t sign,” Stewart said.

Even if only symbolic, the passage of the bills in the House would put fresh pressure on the president. At the same time, administration officials said Trump was in no rush for a resolution to the impasse.

Trump believes he has public opinion on his side and, at very least, his base of supporters behind him, the officials said, speaking on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly.

The Democratic package to end the shutdown would include one bill to temporarily fund the Department of Homeland Security at current levels — with \$1.3 billion for border security, far less than the \$5 billion Trump has said he wants for the wall — through Feb. 8 as talks continued.

It would also include another measure to fund the departments of Agriculture, Interior, Housing and Urban Development and others closed by the partial shutdown. It would provide money through the remainder of the fiscal year, to Sept. 30.

Associated Press writer Kevin Freking contributed to this report.

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