

# Bill Kaplan: Johnson and Pocan at a crossroad

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The nation faces imminent congressional train wrecks in the next week:

- Congress has not passed any appropriations bills, but the fiscal year ends September 30. A government shutdown will happen if this is not remedied. Congressional passage of stopgap funding would be the quickest way to avoid disaster. The stopgap approach is frequently used to allow more time for compromise and negotiation.
- 46 GOP senators have signed a letter “spearheaded” by Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson (*Hill*) warning they will not raise or suspend the debt ceiling. If not resolved, the U.S. could default sometime in October. Senate Republicans said they will filibuster a House-passed bill that includes stopgap funding and suspension of the debt ceiling until the end of 2022 (Wisconsin representatives split along party lines, with Democrats voting yes and Republicans no). Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell took an outrageous position: “The debt ceiling will be raised, as it always should be. But it will be raised by the Democrats.” Note – the debt ceiling has generally been raised in a bipartisan vote because it allows the government to pay for previously approved spending. Moreover, Democrats joined Republicans in raising the debt ceiling as Trump added nearly \$8 trillion to the debt. A default means a recession, higher interest rates and insufficient funds to pay Social Security benefits.
- The House has been blocked by its Progressive Caucus from passing the Senate bipartisan “Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act” (IIJA) – Johnson voted no. The Progressive Caucus is deluded that it gives them leverage over skeptical Senate Democrats to vote for the “Build Back Better Act” (reconciliation bill). However, the Wisconsin Section of the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) said: “This bipartisan infrastructure legislation would provide much-needed funding for projects across the state of Wisconsin ... . ASCE Wisconsin Section urges the U.S. House to pass the historic IIJA for the

well-being of our communities.” Wisconsin Democratic Representative Mark Pocan told the *Washington Post* : “The difference is the Tea Party (compared to the Progressive Caucus) liked to say no and we like to say yes.” Pocan, a Progressive Caucus leader, should urge his colleagues to vote yes on the infrastructure bill. No more delays. Failure will hurt America economically and be a political disaster for Democrats.

- Finally, the Senate is considering the “Build Back Better Act” (reconciliation – immune from a GOP-led filibuster). There are disagreements among Senate Democrats about the scope of the bill, how it’s paid for and the total cost. There is funding for children, climate change, education, healthcare, helping working and low-income people and much more. However, compromise and negotiation are required for passage. The self-evident path forward is to work out a smaller reconciliation bill which all 50 Democrats can support. President Biden said: “We’re at a stalemate at the moment, and we’re going to have to get these two pieces of legislation (infrastructure and reconciliation bills) passed ... .”

We are at a perilous crossroad. Senator Johnson will obstruct. Will Representative Pocan facilitate?

*- Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 – 2009.*

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