

100 lawmakers to debt panel: Consider all options

By ALAN FRAM, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Breaking with party orthodoxy, 40 House Republicans urged Congress' supercommittee on Wednesday to consider all options for raising revenue as they hunt for ways to trim the gargantuan \$14.8 trillion national debt.

Though in a letter to the special debt-reduction panel the GOP lawmakers studiously avoided specific proposals that the signees admitted could shatter the group's unanimity, it seemed to at least crack the door open to the potential consideration of tax increases.

That seemed to separate the 40 Republicans from many of their GOP colleagues, who have said they would only consider new revenue generated by a stronger economy.

The GOP lawmakers joined with 60 House Democrats in the letter, which also called on the supercommittee to keep the door open for savings culled from benefit programs like Medicare, a path opposed by many Democrats. In addition, the letter said the special committee should aim for \$4 trillion in 10-year savings — more than triple the panel's mandated minimum target of \$1.2 trillion.

At a news conference and in separate interviews Wednesday, Republican participants shied away from expressing an unconditional willingness to accept tax increases as part of a final deal.

Even so, the letter's bipartisan, conciliatory tone contrasted with the political atmosphere in Washington that has buffeted the supercommittee, which has made little evident headway just three weeks from the deadline for completing its work.

"To succeed, all options for mandatory and discretionary spending and revenues must be on the table," the letter said. "In addition, we know from other bipartisan frameworks that a target of some \$4 trillion in deficit reduction is necessary to stabilize our debt as a share of the economy and assure America's fiscal well-being."

The signers comprised about 1 in 6 House Republicans and nearly a third of its Democrats — hardly the kind of numbers that typically force difficult decisions in Washington. Even so, participants said they believed many other lawmakers also supported a large package with savings from both spending cuts and new revenues, and expressed hope that a letter signed by 100 of the House's 435 members would have clout.

"When this big deal comes out, any member can find 10, 20, 30 reasons to say 'No,'" said Rep. Steven LaTourette, R-Ohio, one of the signers. "It's now a time for the ostriches to pull their heads out of the sand, the holier than thou crowd to get off their horses, the sacred cows need to be made into hamburger."

So far, the 12-member supercommittee — six Republicans and six Democrats — has faced a dilemma in which Democrats demand higher taxes as their price for accepting significant savings from benefit programs such as Medicare, while Republicans oppose revenue increases and insist on trimming benefit programs.

Bipartisan budget experts have urged the committee to produce at least \$4 trillion in savings. They say doing less would not significantly alter the potential long-term financial nightmare the government faces, in which red ink continues growing faster than the U.S. economy.

"Our country needs our honest, bipartisan judgment and our political courage. Your committee has been given a unique opportunity and authority to act. We are prepared to support you in this effort," the letter states.

The list of signers includes many moderates from both parties. But it also includes conservatives

such as presidential candidate Ron Paul, R-Texas, No. 2 House Democratic leader Steny Hoyer of Maryland and liberals such as Rep. Emanuel Cleaver, D-Mo., who chairs the Congressional Black Caucus. It was organized by Reps. Heath Shuler, D-N.C., and Mike Simpson, R-Idaho.

"We all know you can't get to that kind of number by just looking at one side of the equation or the other," Simpson said of a significant debt-cutting deal.

"I'll give up my election, I'll give up my seat" in exchange for an agreement that helps the country's fiscal future, Shuler said.

In an interview, conservative Rep. Cynthia Lummis, R-Wyo., a signer who has had tea party support, said that while she would prefer to reduce the debt without raising taxes, "This is not an ideal world." She said the national debt is a problem both parties have created and must solve, and said she is not "an absolute 'hell no' person when it comes to considering all options."

Like all but three of the 40 GOP signatories, Lummis has also signed the pledge by anti-tax activist Grover Norquist to oppose tax increases. Lummis said she did so when she was first elected in 2008, but did not sign it last year.

"Grover Norquist is not in my district," she said. "I represent the state of Wyoming and its people."

Norquist did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Democratic participants said it made sense for them to sign a letter opening the door to paring programs like Medicare, which are often called entitlements.

"Those of us who are the strongest supporters of entitlement programs have to be at the table to guarantee sustainability," Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., said in an interview. "If we stand on the sidelines, those programs will be in enormous jeopardy."

The committee faces a Nov. 23 deadline for proposing at least \$1.2 trillion in savings over 10 years. If Congress doesn't approve such a plan by Dec. 23, \$1.2 trillion in automatic cuts would start taking effect in 2013.

Online:

Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction: <http://www.deficitreduction.gov/public>