

Moderate Senators Race to Strike a Deal to end Government Shutdown

By Robert Costa, Erica Werner, Mike DeBonis and Sean Sullivan

WASHINGTON - Efforts to end a government shutdown after two days had yet to produce a breakthrough by early Sunday evening, even as a group of centrist senators raced to strike a deal and expressed optimism that they were close to an agreement.

With the start of the workweek for many federal employees only hours away, and under pressure from President Trump, a bipartisan group of moderate senators tried for an accord on immigration and federal spending they hoped would pave the way to reopening the government by Monday morning.

But after a series of meetings including a conversation between Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., and Minority Leader Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., lawmakers were still trying to nail down an arrangement. Some doubted it would get done swiftly.

Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, McConnell's top deputy, sounded a pessimistic note early Sunday evening, predicting the government would remain shut down on Monday. "Right now yeah, yeah I do" think so, he said.

Other Republican senators who met with McConnell said they were encouraged, but offered few specifics about the framework for a potential compromise. Centrist Democrats appealed to

Schumer to find a way to reopen the government, as GOP political operatives geared up campaign attacks against them.

"We recognize that ultimately it's the decision of Mitch McConnell and Chuck Schumer," said Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine. She added: "We're trying to be helpful in showing them that there is a path forward."

The talks came as McConnell said he would bring up a proposal to fund the government through Feb. 8 at 1 a.m. Monday, or sooner. He blamed Democrats for the holdup and urged them to allow a vote sooner.

"This shutdown is gonna get a lot worse tomorrow," McConnell said as

the Senate opened a second day of a rare weekend session. "Today would be a good day to end it."

As evening approached, a sense of urgency was setting in among some lawmakers and the atmosphere was tense in the Capitol.

"If it doesn't happen tonight, it's going to get a lot harder tomorrow," said Sen. Lindsey O. Graham, R-S.C. He said the White House was largely uninvolved in talking with the group of centrist senators and staff there "has been unreliable to work with on this issue."

Graham, who at one point predicted a "breakthrough" Sunday night, said the

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House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., center, speaks during a news conference with other House Democratic women on Capitol Hill on Sunday amid a spending-bill impasse in Congress. MUST CREDIT: Bloomberg photo by Andrew Harrer