

## RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

## TRANSPORTATION, HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 2016

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will resume consideration of H.R. 2577, which the clerk will report.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (H.R. 2577) making appropriations for the Departments of Transportation, and Housing and Urban Development, and related agencies for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2016, and for other purposes.

## Pending:

Collins amendment No. 3896, in the nature of a substitute.

McConnell (for Lee) amendment No. 3897 (to amendment No. 3896), to prohibit the use of funds to carry out a rule and notice of the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

McConnell (for Nelson/Rubio) amendment No. 3898 (to amendment No. 3896), making supplemental appropriations for fiscal year 2016 to respond to Zika virus.

McConnell (for Cornyn) modified amendment No. 3899 (to amendment No. 3896), making emergency supplemental appropriations for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2016.

McConnell (for Blunt) modified amendment No. 3900 (to amendment No. 3896), Zika response and preparedness.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the time until 12:30 p.m. will be equally divided between the managers or their designees.

The Senator from Montana.

Mr. TESTER. Mr. President, as we begin consideration of the fiscal year 2017 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs appropriations bill, I want to start by thanking the chairman of the subcommittee and his staff.

The process Chairman KIRK and I put into place was fair, inclusive, and open, and I appreciate that he went out of his way to incorporate input from me, my team, and Senators from this side of the aisle.

This bill does right by our brave service men and women by honoring our Nation's commitment to veterans, Active-Duty military, and their families. We owe these folks our gratitude for their selfless sacrifice to freedom and democracy.

As a result of last year's bipartisan budget agreement, we are on the same page this year in terms of top-line funding numbers. This level of funding has allowed us to make critical investments in military construction, veterans programs, as well as Arlington National Cemetery and the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims.

For VA, this bill provides \$102 billion in mandatory funding for veterans' benefits—\$102 billion—and includes an additional \$103.9 billion in fiscal year 2018 advance funding to ensure that there is not a lapse in getting dis-

ability compensation and education benefits to our veterans.

For VA's discretionary accounts, including the Veterans Health Administration, the bill appropriates \$74.9 billion. That is \$3.4 billion more than the Department has this year. Within that amount, we are able to target increased funding for several key priorities for veterans. That includes health care, disability claims and appeals processing, medical and prosthetic research, and family caregiver support. That means the VA will be able to aggressively pursue critical veteran-centered research into a host of medical conditions, including PTSD and traumatic brain injury—the unseen wounds of war that are so difficult to both identify and treat. It also means the VA will have additional resources to meet the growing demand of caregivers who are providing critical, family-centered, long-term care for our veterans, and it will allow VBA to hire 300 new claims processors and 240 additional employees for the Board of Veterans Appeals, all focused on reducing the appeals backlog—something Senator SULLIVAN and I are working on over on the authorizing side. These funds will complement that work.

The bill before us also includes a new medical community care account that consolidates the various sources of funding that connect veterans to care in their own communities. The creation of this new account is extremely important in providing better oversight over a program that is critical for our veterans, particularly those in rural areas where services through the VA are often unavailable. It is also a key component in ongoing efforts to consolidate and streamline the number of different programs the VA has to get veterans care in their local communities. That is something a number of us are working on in a bipartisan manner in the Veterans' Affairs Committee.

On the MILCON side of the ledger, the bill before us also delivers. We have provided increased funding for a number of unfunded MILCON requirements identified by the services. Given the severe constraints on the budget, funding for military construction is squeezed more tightly now than ever. It is not just the cost of trying to maintain a deteriorating building, which in itself is substantial, it is also the impact that effort has on training, readiness, and retention of personnel—the very areas DOD is struggling to reinforce.

Shortchanging military construction is not a cost-effective or sustainable defense strategy over the long haul. That is why I am glad this bill provides nearly \$500 million over the budget requested for unfunded priorities.

I am pleased the majority chose not to put forward controversial amendments on this bill during committee consideration. The bill that funds veterans health care and our military installations should not be a vehicle for politics. Our veterans and our service-

members deserve a clean bill, so we need to avoid the ugly stuff on this bill.

I have a lot more to say about this bill as it is considered over the next, hopefully, several days. For now, I reiterate my thanks to the folks on the majority side, as well as Vice Chairman MIKULSKI, for their efforts in getting us where we are today.

Lastly, I remind all of our colleagues that we are open for business. So if there are amendments you are thinking about, get them filed and get them to our staffs so we can move forward. Amendments at the eleventh hour are never good, so get them in early so we can consider them.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oklahoma.

Mr. INHOFE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to speak as in morning business.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

## PRESIDENT'S POLICY ON TRANSGENDER ACCESS TO SCHOOL BATHROOMS

Mr. INHOFE. Mr. President, since Friday, my State and DC offices have been flooded with calls from concerned constituents regarding President Obama's latest unilateral action directing public schools and colleges to allow transgender kids into the bathrooms and locker rooms of their choice. In Oklahoma, we understand what this is all about. This is all about a liberal agenda being crammed down the neck of Oklahoma and the rest of the country.

On Sunday, I went to a church service near the Grand Lake area in Northeastern Oklahoma, where the nearest community has about 250 people. The pastor, whose name is Mark, said, "If ever there were a Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego moment in America, it is now."

They understand that there is a real battle going on in Washington for our values. These values should be decided at the local level by the parents and teachers who truly understand what needs to take place to protect all kids.

He went on to say that "we have to embolden our school board members [and other politicians] with our support." I agree. This is why I put forth a bill last year, which passed last year, to empower local school authorities to make these kinds of decisions. What the President is doing is unilaterally redefining title IX of the education law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex. With the new guidance he has issued, Obama is aiming to prohibit anything that could be construed as discrimination against "gender identity, including discrimination based on a student's transgender status."

Ultimately, the President is demanding, under threat of losing significant public assistance—in my State of Oklahoma, this amounts to about \$450 million—if States and school districts don't comply. In other words, it is blackmail: You comply or you lose something you are entitled to.