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Senate

The Senate met at 10 a.m. and was called to order by the Honorable BEN RAY LUJÁN, a Senator from the State of New Mexico.

PRAYER

The Chaplain, Dr. Barry C. Black, offered the following prayer:

Let us pray.

Come to us now, gracious God, as we seek Your presence. Shine Your light into the hearts of our lawmakers, empowering them to work for Your honor and glory. Lord, give them the wisdom to strive for integrity in every area of their lives, staying true to You regardless of the consequences. Remind them that because of You they are never alone. Let their lives be examples of people who are passionate about loving You.

We pray in Your faithful Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The Presiding Officer led the Pledge of Allegiance, as follows:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

APPOINTMENT OF ACTING PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will please read a communication to the Senate from the President pro tempore (Mr. LEAHY).

The senior assistant legislative clerk read the following letter:

U.S. SENATE,
PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE,
Washington, DC, December 8, 2021.

To the Senate:

Under the provisions of rule I, paragraph 3, of the Standing Rules of the Senate, I hereby appoint the Honorable BEN RAY LUJÁN, a Senator from the State of New Mexico, to perform the duties of the Chair.

PATRICK J. LEAHY,
President pro tempore.

Mr. LUJÁN thereupon assumed the Chair as Acting President pro tempore.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

MORNING BUSINESS

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate will be in a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The majority leader is recognized.

SENATE LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, at the beginning of December, I said the Senate had a lot of hard work to do in order to address several critical priorities before the end of the year.

When the month began, America knew we had to avoid a government shutdown; we had to approve our annual Defense bill; we had to preserve the full faith and credit of the United States; take action on Build Back Better before Christmas, as well as deal with voting rights.

It is now December 8, and the Senate is making very good progress on all of these priorities. It was a big, big agenda, and we are clearly not through with it, but we are making good progress. There is clearly light at the end of the tunnel on the debt ceiling and the Defense bill based on the agreement Leader McCONNELL and I came to and the House's action last night. Let me go over those details.

Last night, the House of Representatives sent us two important pieces of legislation. One of them is a compromise version of our annual Defense bill, which I expect will earn bipartisan support in this Chamber in the coming days.

I want to thank my colleagues, especially Senator REED, Ranking Member INHOFE, and all my colleagues, who worked to shape this legislation to help us make sure we pass a bipartisan Defense bill this year, as we have done for decades.

The second bill they sent us will enable the Chamber to swiftly address the debt limit, sparing our country from the calamity—and a calamity it would have been—of a first-ever default on our national debt. This fast-tracked process was included in a bill that will also provide critical protections for Medicare funding, preventing slashes in that very important funding to so many seniors, and waive the pay-go rule to avoid harmful cuts.

Last night, I took the first procedural step to advance this legislation, setting up a cloture vote to take place as soon as Thursday. Once our proposal is approved by the Senate, we will be able to address the debt limit in this Chamber with a simple majority vote, which is exactly what Democrats have been seeking for months and what I have been asking for at this podium time after time, after time.

I want to thank the Republican leader for his help in working with us to find a responsible path that avoids partisan brinksmanship.

Democrats have always said that the Senate should be able to raise the debt limit without resorting to a convoluted, lengthy, and risky reconciliation process, and under our plan, we won't have to do that.

Democrats have also said repeatedly that the responsible thing to do is to raise the debt ceiling. Both Democrats and Republicans voted for the spending increase. We have said repeatedly that

• This "bullet" symbol identifies statements or insertions which are not spoken by a Member of the Senate on the floor.



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we are ready to shoulder this burden even if our Republican colleagues are not going to be able to. It now looks like we will be able to do that—to have 50 Democrats vote responsibly and do what is good for the Nation, avoiding catastrophe by raising the debt ceiling to pay the debts we have already incurred, just like any household must do.

This agreement we have secured is the responsible path forward. No gamesmanship on the debt limit means no default on our sovereign debt and the calamity—the calamity—that it would cause.

Again, I thank my Republican colleagues and Leader MCCONNELL. We have had fruitful, honest, and good discussions over the last several weeks to come up with this proposal.

We are not over the finish line yet, but I want to thank all of my colleagues for working in good faith to move forward on this responsibility that must be addressed in the coming days. Soon, we will be able to cross another major item off our December to-do list. And we have more to roll up our sleeves and get working on. They are so important.

BUILD BACK BETTER ACT

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, Build Back Better: So, in the first few days of December, we have successfully avoided a government shutdown. We have cleared the path, hopefully, for addressing the debt limit; and, as I mentioned, I am optimistic that the NDAA will soon be settled.

None of these are easy accomplishments, but we are clearing the path for Democrats to turn to our biggest domestic priority of the year: passing President Biden's Build Back Better Act before Christmas.

Later today, four Senate committees will release the final texts of their portions of Build Back Better, along with CBO scores for each, as required by the reconciliation process. Those four committees are Commerce, Small Business, Banking and Housing, and Veterans' Affairs.

In the meantime, I continue to hold daily conversations with my Democratic colleagues, with the White House, with the Speaker, and House colleagues. We continue to make good progress, and we are still on track to vote on a final product before Christmas. The sooner we can pass Build Back Better, the better off American families will be as we start the new year.

This bill has always been about a simple goal: cutting costs for working and middle-class families.

People are complaining about higher costs. They are right to do that. This bill actually lowers costs in many different areas and will help families who are trying to make ends meet and stretch those dollars. Let me give you some examples.

Families are still struggling to pull themselves out of a once-in-a-century

economic crisis brought about by COVID. They want to pay less for things like healthcare, prescription drugs, childcare—some of the biggest costs average middle-income and working families have. They want us to find ways to make that happen, and that is exactly what Build Back Better does.

America, if you want lower costs, tell your Senators to vote for Build Back Better.

If we invest in American families, then we make it easier for them to work, to be productive, to flourish in society, and that makes our country stronger and lowers costs in the long term.

One of the great problems, we are told, is a shortage of workers. One of the greatest reasons for the shortage of workers is the lack of good childcare. People can't go to work if they have to look after their kids. And in this post-COVID era, a lot of the patterns that used to happen don't happen anymore.

Making childcare affordable will help bring people back to work, get our economy humming along again, and deal with some of the bottlenecks in certain areas, from certain industries, which is creating inflation.

Helping families afford childcare, of course, saves parents money, but it goes a long way to alleviating our labor shortage. If parents don't have to worry about how they will keep their kids safe during the day, they will have greater flexibility to reenter the workforce and increase the country's output. That lowers inflation.

In the long term, everyone wins—kids, parents, employers, and the entire economy. This single investment alone is enough reason to keep pushing Build Back Better, but there are so many.

One of the greatest costs we face is prescription drug costs. That is what families complain about above all. This bill goes a long way to making prescription drugs cost less.

Another great cost people are complaining about is the rising cost of housing. This bill puts more money into housing—into both rehabilitating housing that has deteriorated and putting them back into the marketplace in a real way and into creating new housing. It will reduce the dramatic increase in housing costs.

So you want to talk about inflation, you want to talk about people having to pay more, this bill is an antidote in so many areas. I have mentioned childcare, healthcare, and housing, just to name a few, but there are many others as well.

So we are going to keep working in getting this bill done. It is so important to working families and to America. To working families: less expenses, easier to make that dollar stretch when we sit down Friday night after dinner and say, "How are we going to pay the bills this week?" To America: relieving bottlenecks and making sure that our economy hums along at a rapid rate, where people are getting

good wages, but the bottlenecks caused often by COVID are reduced.

VACCINES

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, one more issue—the upcoming vaccine CRA.

On another matter, reports this morning indicate that getting vaccinated and boosted offer significant protection against the Omicron variant.

As we learn more about Omicron, it is an important moment for national leaders to double- and triple-down on encouraging all eligible Americans to get vaccinated and boosted as soon as possible.

But as soon as today, our Republican friends are going to come to the floor to push an anti-science, anti-vaccine proposal to overturn the President's vaccines requirements for businesses with more than 100 employees.

My friends, America, we are in the middle of a public health crisis. Everyone sees the damage it causes to themselves, their friends, their families, and their communities, and the way to solve this is to be driven by science.

We have had hundreds of years of scientific advancement. It has helped us live longer and live healthier. My dad just lived until 98. That didn't happen in a vacuum, and it certainly wouldn't have happened when there were scientific advances and people said, "Let's not listen to them," for political, ideological, or whatever reasons. We cannot go back to the days when people were driven by wild theories.

Some of the anti-vaxxers here in this Chamber remind me of what happened 400 years ago, when people were clinging to the fact that the Sun revolved around the Earth—they just didn't believe science—or 300 years ago or 500 years ago, when they were sure the Earth was flat. It is just like that.

The science is here. And what does the science show? The more people who get vaccinated, the greater chance we have to eliminate and, certainly, greatly reduce the virulence and "widespreadness" of this disease.

People are resisting. Is it political? Is it fueled by lies on the internet? Is it just because people fear vaccines? We never had this outcry when we had to give our kids—my kids—mumps, measles vaccines before they went to school. We never had this outcry as people lined up to get flu shots.

All of a sudden, something has happened here. It is wrong, and it is bad for the country, and it is not based on any scientific evidence whatsoever.

I know that wild stories on the internet, lies, sometimes get in people's heads, but we can't listen to people's lies. We are a fact-based society. We always have been.

The biggest thing standing between us and the end of the pandemic is Americans who have refused to get vaccinated. Too many Americans believe a wide range of conspiracy theories