

Why McCarthy decided to take on his right flank and prevent the shutdown

CNN —

Speaker Kevin McCarthy didn't know whether the House could avoid a government shutdown when he met with his divided Republican conference on Saturday morning.

But behind closed doors, McCarthy's unexpected decision to take on his conservative critics quickly came together.

After GOP leaders prepared McCarthy's conference for an indefinite shutdown, his allies grew uneasy. Rep. Bryan Steil took to the mic, comparing a shutdown to a bike ride down a treacherous Bolivian mountain known as "Death Road," according to sources in the room.

If the brakes on your bike fail, Steil said, you are trained to turn into the mountain immediately, because the farther down the mountain you go, the worse the crash will be. The longer you go into a shutdown as a conservative, the Wisconsin Republican argued, the worse conservatives' options will be.

Then, one by one, vulnerable New York Republicans – Reps. Mike Lawler, Marc Molinaro and Nick LaLota – spoke in support of a short-term funding bill, warning of the political blowback of a shutdown and calling on their colleagues to keep the government open.

The speaker was ready to move. Turning to his conference, McCarthy asked, "Do we want to jam the Senate?" to loud cheers from his allies. McCarthy turned to an aide and asked how quickly they could go to the floor – a "clean" stopgap bill had already been filed late Friday night.

Fifteen minutes, the aide responded.

With that, McCarthy took the only option on the table to avoid a government shutdown, relying on Democratic votes to pass a continuing resolution Saturday to keep the government funded until mid-November.

But in so doing, McCarthy opened up a fight with the right wing of his conference, which had warned him for weeks that taking this step could mean the end of his speakership.

Florida Rep. Matt Gaetz told CNN's Jake Tapper on "State of the Union" Sunday that he is planning to attempt to oust McCarthy from his role this week.

"I do intend to file a motion to vacate against Speaker McCarthy this week. I think we need to rip off the Band-Aid. I think we need to move on with new leadership that can be trustworthy," Gaetz said.

McCarthy's eleventh-hour decision to put a clean bill on the floor to fund the government – without the border policies or deep spending cuts demanded by conservatives – marks a new chapter in McCarthy's tenuous relationship with his right flank. It's a showdown that has been weeks, if not months, in the making, after a band of rebels denied his ascent to speakership until after 15 grueling rounds of votes in January.

McCarthy conveyed to his members that he had exhausted all other options that could pass the House – though, in reality, it's been clear for weeks that a continuing resolution with the support of Democrats would be the only way to keep the government open. After McCarthy moved to a vote on a clean stopgap funding bill, which included additional funds for disaster relief but not for Ukraine aid, the measure quickly cleared both the House and Senate with big bipartisan majorities before the government was set to shut down at midnight.

The House's move to avoid a shutdown was a surprising change of course for McCarthy, who had been eager to avoid the showdown with his critics. But now, knowing full well he's likely to soon face a

so-called motion to vacate vote, McCarthy is taking his detractors head-on – and in increasingly combative terms.

“If somebody wants to make a motion against me, bring it,” McCarthy said at a news conference after the House approved the stopgap measure. “There has to be an adult in the room. I am going to govern with what’s best for this country.”

McCarthy’s loudest critics are determined to oust him as speaker and are strategizing over how – and when – to make their move. But sources close to the rebels say they want to build opposition and get the numbers on their side before they force a snap vote.

Gaetz continued to slam the speaker’s leadership Saturday. “There’s nothing about delaying this process that is being the adult in the room,” he said. “We are at this point because Kevin McCarthy made multiple contradictory promises about the budget top line to different groups of people.”

In recent days, Gaetz has been reaching out to Democrats to gauge where they stand and making his sales pitch about who he sees as a replacement for the job, floating names such as veteran GOP Rep. Tom Cole and House GOP Whip Tom Emmer. Gaetz knows he will likely need most – if not all – Democrats on his side to succeed.

The earliest McCarthy’s critics could start the process to oust him is Monday, when the House will be back in session.

For House Democrats, it took a little bit of time Saturday – along with the pulling of a fire alarm in a House office building – but they ultimately chose to join Republicans to pass the stopgap funding measure.

That doesn’t mean, of course, that they intend to help McCarthy keep his job as speaker. House Democratic leaders said in a statement Saturday evening they expect McCarthy to allow for a vote on a bill on supporting Ukraine.

But McCarthy’s allies are confident that an overwhelming number of House Republicans support the speaker and that Democrats won’t help Gaetz throw the House into chaos – especially after McCarthy helped avert a shutdown, part of the speaker’s calculation in making such a move.