

In writing this column, I sometimes refer to state legislative actions taking place in Raleigh that may impact local governments and our community. Seldom, if ever, have I referred to legislation that comes from Washington, at least until now.

Before Christmas, the U.S. Congress struggled to pass a continuing budget resolution to avoid a government shutdown. There was a lot of suspense about whether this legislation could be passed before the federal government ran out of money.

The initial proposal was a bipartisan effort to continue government funding. Some called it an omnibus bill full of budget provisions that legislators wanted to pass before the close of this Congress.

Elon Musk and President-Elect Trump intervened and declared there was too much pork in the legislation. It failed to move forward. Under Musk's guidance, a bare-bone, stripped-down version was brought to the floor of the house only to be voted down.

Just before the deadline, the Republicans and Democrats came together to cobble together a continuing budget resolution that both parties could accept. Both parties had to compromise. The Republicans had to give up on lifting the debt ceiling requirements that triggered these emergency continuing budget resolutions. The Democrats had to drop several rider provisions that they wanted but were not essential to continuing the federal government's operation.

Here is where this horse trading impacted one issue that may hurt Highlands. I have been working with Sherry Sims on addressing a problem that threatens to shutdown local, independent pharmacies. The big insurance companies and the pharmaceutical industry have partnered to control the prices we all pay for prescriptions and medications. They have created a middleman system that sets drug prices based on the large sales volume of drugstore chains like CVS and Walgreens and insurance companies like United Healthcare. The middleman's role is to set prices for the benefit of the drug chain stores and the insurance companies. Folks like Sherry, who try to provide medications for local customers at a reasonable rate of return and a minimal profit for the pharmacy, are cut out of the system and are out of luck. Sherry is expected to pay a premium for the drugs and receive minimal reimbursements from the insurance companies. The scheme is a formula for bankruptcy for small pharmacies.

The initial continuing budget resolution had legislation that would have addressed this inequity by making the middleman drug procurement operation separate and independent from any pharmaceutical providers or insurance companies. In short, the legislation would have

broken up this growing price-rigging monopoly and returned to a more open market. Sherry and I were both disappointed when this drug legislation was stripped at the last minute to get the needed 2/3 vote for the 11th-hour continuing budget resolution.

We had both talked to Congressman Edwards about federal legislation needing to level the playing field for independent pharmacies outside the big corporate networks. I hope the congressman and other responsible representatives will be able to revive and pass this much-needed legislation in the new Congress. In Highlands, our seniors need a pharmacy where they can get their essential medications filled without having to travel down the mountain. Plateau seniors shouldn't have to pay an extra premium for their covered prescriptions either.

Another piece of legislation that was not renewed was the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determining Act. Counties like Macon, which have large tracts of national forest land, received federal funds from the sale of timber and other commercial activities on forest service lands under this legislation. When it was passed 24 years ago, the rationale for this legislation was to compensate counties that cannot collect property taxes on large spans of federal lands in their counties. Western states heavily depend on this federal revenue source even more than us.

This legislation was also in the original continuing resolution and was dropped out of the final legislation. Again, I hope Congress will reauthorize the Secure Rural Schools Act when they return in January. Passage will benefit many WNC communities.