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Congress gets no rest during a hectic August

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WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Congress usually relishes August as a month for meeting with voters, taking family vacations and catching up on work that languishes during the session.

Not so this year.

Sen. Mark Dayton, D-Minn., is hobbling around the Capitol on crutches and attending 9/11 commission hearings as he recovers from knee surgery. Democratic Rep. Betty McCollum took her vacation in Iraq this year and, like many of Minnesota's congressional delegation, is spending the rest of the recess shuttling between D.C. and Minnesota.

Nearly a dozen committee meetings have been held in the past several weeks to examine the 9/11 commission report, which was released just after Congress adjourned for its August recess. And the Minnesota delegation is busy trying to stay involved in the 9/11 activity without sacrificing campaign commitments, convention activities or meetings with constituents.

Sen. Norm Coleman, R-Minn., gave up a family vacation in Malibu during his birthday week to grill 9/11 commissioners, former government agency heads and survivor groups about the recommendations. He said he's unlikely to get a break before Christmas.

"This is the single most important issue facing our country," Coleman said. "I had no qualms and no hesitation in coming back."

Dayton, who rescheduled physical therapy to attend the hearings, said that the inconvenience was a small price to pay.

"This is bigger than any of us," Dayton said. "This is bigger than politics, this is bigger than elections, and we all recognize that."

Rep. John Kline, R-Minn., who spent upwards of 12 hours listening to testimony last week before the House Armed Services Committee, said he was thankful for the recess hearings, which he said would prevent Congress from "running back and enacting legislation that imposes verbatim" commission recommendations.

"We all have a better level of understanding now than we did when the commission report came out," Kline said.

McCollum said that Congress should be doing even more. She wants House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., to reconvene the House immediately.

"Our country is at war," McCollum said. "9/11 happened three years ago. We can't keep up this leisurely pace."

Rep. Collin Peterson, D-Minn., who sits on the House Select Committee on Intelligence, also participated in hearings last week and is expected to return for more next week.

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