WASHINGTON -- The White House on Tuesday made it clear that President Obama would veto a bill authorizing construction of the *Keystone* XL oil pipeline, setting up an immediate clash with Republicans just as they assume control of Congress.

"The president threatening to veto the first bipartisan infrastructure bill of the new Congress must come as a shock to the American people who spoke loudly in November in favor of bipartisan accomplishments," Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the new majority leader, said on Tuesday.

Mr. McConnell has vowed to make the *Keystone* bill the first measure that the new Congress sends to the president's desk. The House is expected to pass the bill on Friday, and the Senate is expected to take up the measure next week.

For nearly four years, the *Keystone* pipeline has been a symbolic flash point in the political war between Republicans and Democrats over energy, climate change and jobs -- even though many policy experts say the project's impact in those areas will be small.

The legislation proposed by Republicans would take away Mr. Obama's authority to make a decision on the pipeline, which the president has because the pipeline would cross an international border. But Mr. Obama has said he cannot make a decision until the State Department completes an environmental review, which has been held up until there is a verdict in a Nebraska court case over the route of the pipeline.

"I would not anticipate that the president would sign this legislation," the White House spokesman, Josh Earnest, said on Tuesday. "There's a well-established process that shouldn't be changed by legislation."

Mr. Obama's veto would make the pipeline even more of a political issue. The 1,179-mile oil pipeline, which would carry 830,000 barrels of petroleum a day from the oil sands of boreal forests in western Canada to oil refineries and ports on the Gulf Coast, enjoys bipartisan support in Congress as well as with the public.

Six Senate Democrats have signed on to the Republican-sponsored bill, and a poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in November found that 59 percent of Americans support the project. One of those senators, Joe Manchin III of West Virginia, said he was "very upset, very surprised," by the president's threat to veto the bill. "I think it's absolutely, totally ridiculous that they would do something like that in this period of time, when we're just starting out," he said.

But Senator Charles E. Schumer, Democrat of New York, said he was "pretty confident" that Republicans would still not be able to muster the 67 votes necessary to override a presidential veto. As the Senate debates the bill over the coming weeks, Mr. Schumer said, Democrats will offer up amendments designed to highlight what they see as the project's flaws.

If Mr. Obama does veto a bill, it will not stand as his last word on the pipeline's construction. Nonetheless, environmentalists cheered Mr. Earnest's announcement Tuesday as a sign that the president would eventually reject the pipeline.
"It's becoming more clear by the day that President Obama rightly recognizes this dirty and dangerous tar sands pipeline is a bad deal for our country," said Michael Brune, executive director of the Sierra Club.

The company hoping to build the pipeline, TransCanada, applied for a building permit with the State Department in 2008. During the early years of the Obama administration, the pipeline was viewed as little more than a routine infrastructure project. But environmental groups seized on the issue during the 2012 presidential campaign, demanding that Mr. Obama veto the project as a symbol of his commitment to fighting climate change. Republicans and the oil industry retaliated by demanding that he approve a project that they called a major job-creator.

A State Department analysis of the project, released last January, concluded that it would not significantly increase the rate of planet-warming carbon dioxide emissions, noting that producers would extract oil sands petroleum and move it to market with or without construction of the pipeline. The review estimated that Keystone would support 42,000 temporary jobs over its two-year construction period -- about 3,900 of them in construction, the rest in indirect support jobs, such as food service. It estimated that it would create 35 permanent jobs.

"This is a tempest in a teapot, in terms of substance," said Michael Levi, an expert on energy and climate change policy at the Council on Foreign Relations. "The costs are small. The benefits are small. It's the politics that are big."

Once the Nebraska court delivers its verdict, the State Department is expected to restart its environmental review, but there is no deadline for a final decision. However, if the Nebraska court concludes that the pipeline's route was improperly permitted, TransCanada may have to reapply for its permit to build in the state -- a process that could take months or even years.

If Mr. Obama decides to wait until that process is complete, the final decision could be pushed well into 2016 or beyond. The result, said Paul Bledsoe, a top climate change official in the Clinton administration who is now with the German Marshall Fund, is that "Keystone will now be front and center in the presidential cycle."


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