

THE BOND BUYER

Puerto Rico to get disaster aid coordinator, more federal aid

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Puerto Rico's economy could soon be bolstered as it claws its way out of bankruptcy with a speedup in the disbursement of federal aid as a result of the appointment of Coast Guard Rear Adm. Peter J. Brown as the island's federal disaster aid coordinator.

In addition, the House is scheduled to vote Friday on a new round of \$4.67 billion in disaster aid to deal with the aftermath of recent earthquakes.

Puerto Rico's nonvoting representative in the House said Sunday that President Trump has selected Brown to serve in the post, although no official announcement had been made as of Tuesday afternoon by the White House for the long-awaited appointment.



House Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Nita Lowey, D-N.Y. **Bloomberg News**

Unlike the mid-January appointment of Robert M. Couch by Department of Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson to serve as his department's Federal Financial Monitor on the island and U.S. Virgin Islands, Brown apparently will have czar-like oversight of all federal aid.

The Trump administration has held back its disbursement of disaster aid to Puerto Rico because of concerns about financial corruption and said last August it was planning to appoint a federal administrator.

Couch, a former HUD official, "has an extensive background with decades of private and public sector experience dealing with financial reporting, risk management, and executing the law," Carson said last month. "Robert will be an asset in supporting HUD's mission to continue aiding recovery efforts in Puerto Rico while ensuring that appropriated funds are used in a responsible manner and for their intended purpose."

Brown, meanwhile, has higher-level White House connections as Trump's third homeland security and counterterrorism adviser.

A native New Yorker who grew up in the northern Westchester County community of Somers, he formerly served as commander of the Seventh Coast Guard District covering Southeast states and the Caribbean.

Another step forward for Puerto Rico's recovery is expected Friday when the House is scheduled to vote on a new round of \$4.67 billion in disaster aid to deal with the aftermath of recent earthquakes.

The proposed assistance is \$1.3 billion more than House Democrats proposed two weeks earlier.

"Our fellow Americans in Puerto Rico have urgent needs following recent earthquakes," House Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Nita Lowey, D-N.Y., said in making the announcement last week. "While President Trump has finally released some of the aid Congress has already appropriated for hurricanes, more support is clearly needed."

Lowey described the new funding as "targeted assistance to help families and communities recover from these devastating earthquakes and puts the island on a better path to long-term recovery."

The revised package includes \$3.26 billion in Community Development Block Grant-Disaster Recovery money for restoration work and mitigation

improvements to infrastructure and housing along with \$1.25 billion road and bridge repairs.

There's also \$100 million for schools and other educational facilities, \$15 million to improve the resilience of the electrical grid and \$6.75 million cybersecurity and earthquake risk analysis.

However, the Senate has not yet announced the amount of its earthquake supplemental or when it might be considered.