

# Common Cause concerned on budget proposal

By BEN J. PLASTINO  
Post-Register political editor

WASHINGTON — Common Cause, the volunteer citizen organization which keeps an eye on governmental issues, raised concern in a news release Tuesday on the proposal for a constitutional amendment requiring a balanced federal budget as a way to control "runaway government."

Common Cause President Fred Wertheimer said he has told Congress "As Congress heads into an election year and the largest budget deficit in our history, the temptation will be great for some to hold out for the future what no one is seriously prepared to give in the present — a balanced budget."

"Members of Congress owe it to the country to resist the election-year temptation of yielding to political expediency at the expense of our constitution."

Wertheimer urged Congress to strengthen the government's budget process and leave "basic responsibility and accountability for these matters where they belong — with the nation's elected leaders."

Georgianna Rathbun, Common Cause vice president, quoted a number of political leaders who question the wisdom of

the proposal, although on the face it appears desirable.

She noted President Reagan staged a rally July 19 on the Capitol steps calling for the amendment.

She pointed out, however, that some supporters of the president doubt the wisdom of the amendment now before Congress.

She quoted Rudolph Penner, of the conservative American Enterprise Institute, saying "it is so fraught with loopholes that it imposes little restraint. Its main effect is to allow politicians to go firmly on record in favor of the concept of a balanced budget while continuing to allocate society's resources however they please."

Ms. Rathbun said the political appeal is so strong that more than half of the members of the Senate and House have co-sponsored it, and the Senate may soon pass it.

In the House, a discharge petition to bring the amendment to the floor for debate is creeping closer to the necessary 218 signatures, she said. To become part of the U.S. Constitution the amendment must pass the House and Senate each by two-thirds majorities and be ratified by three-fourths of the states.

Ms. Rathbun noted "that in June, Con-

gress and the president approved a \$103.9 billion deficit for the next fiscal year, the largest in history, now they are trying to amend the Constitution to require future Congresses and presidents to balance their budget."

She noted that critics cry hypocrisy in this 1982 election year, adding "the White House has seized on the amendment as a way to sugarcoat the \$104 billion deficit and divert attention from the country's economic troubles."

She said many Democrats and some members of the president's own Republican party are not in favor.

She quoted Sens. Charles M. Mathias, R-Md., and House Majority Leader Jim Wright, D-Texas, as questioning the amendment.

Sen. Strom Thurmond, R-S.C., in supporting the amendment, observed Congress cannot even abide by its own laws in the matter of budget.

Among the questions raised by opponents, said Ms. Rathbun, is whether it is enforceable, and if so, will it not inject the courts into the budget process and thus alter the delicate balance of power among the three branches of government.

The Senate report is vague as to how it would be enforced, saying the president

and Congress should "monitor" actual spending after a balanced budget plan is adopted.

She noted even Budget Director David Stockman, conceded some difficulties while James D. Davidson, chairman of the National Taxpayers Union, commented "the courts will be asked to step in because the amendment will not enforce itself."

Most economists also believe the government must accept temporary deficits to get the economy rolling again because in a recession, government revenues shrinking, and spending to relieve unemployment increases. The pending amendment recognizes this possibility by permitting government spending to exceed income if approved by three-fifths vote of the full membership of Congress.

Sen. Alan Cranston, D-Calif, observed this amendment invites "a dangerous and critical political impasse and governmental paralysis."

Ms. Rathbun said a number of other conservative voices question the amendment, including the Wall Street Journal, Senate Budget Committee chairman, Pete Domenici, R-N.M., the General Accounting Office, and Sen. Nancy Kassebaum, R-Kans.