

Reporting from Los Angeles and Washington - Boeing Co.'s C-17 cargo plane, assembled in Long Beach and in a fight for survival in the nation's Capitol, gained the support of the House on Thursday but faces political head winds in the Senate. It is one of the first budget showdowns between President Obama and Congress.

In a victory for the aerospace giant, the House included \$2.2 billion for eight more C-17s in a war-spending bill.

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates has called for ending production once the last plane on order rolls off the Long Beach assembly line in 2011 as part of a sweeping Pentagon spending reform push.

The Senate Appropriations Committee, in a separate action, provided no money for additional C-17s. But the plane's supporters had cause to hope after the committee chairman's response to Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), who pleaded for funding.

"The senator has good reason to be optimistic," said Chairman Daniel K. Inouye (D-Hawaii), suggesting money for the plane was likely to be forthcoming. "I have been and remain a strong supporter of the C-17 program, and I am committed to finding a responsible way to maintain the program."

The Senate is expected to take up the bill next week. Once it acts, House and Senate negotiators will reconcile differences between the bills.

The last major military aircraft produced in Southern California, once a center of the aerospace industry, the C-17 stands a good chance of surviving the budget ax because of a political constituency as strong as its engines.

The fight is seen as a key test of Obama's budget-cutting efforts in the face of lawmakers looking out for their home-state interests.

"Once they get used to overriding the president, they'll keep doing it," Loren Thompson, military

policy analyst for the Lexington Institute, said of Congress.

The plane, in production since the early 1990s, has the backing of odd bedfellows, from liberal Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) to conservative Sen. James M. Inhofe (R-Okla.). A key reason: Its aircraft parts come from more than 650 suppliers in 43 states.

"Parochial interests rule," said Rep. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.), who supports ending C-17 production.

The plane's landing gear comes from Cleveland; its cockpit, nose and cargo ramp and door from St. Louis; engines from Connecticut; avionics from Binghamton, N.Y.; tail sections and engine coverings from Dallas; seats from Phoenix; and so on.

The plane provides more than 5,000 jobs in Long Beach and an additional 15,000 elsewhere in the state. Boeing, one of the largest private employers in Southern California with about 25,000 workers, has said that its C-17 plant next to Long Beach airport will shut down in early 2011 without more orders.

"Congress is mainly concerned about protecting jobs," Thompson said, then paused. "And votes."

C-17 supporters have been baffled by a sudden turnaround in Obama's support for the aircraft. It was one of only two military programs that Obama had singled out on his website for more funding during the presidential campaign and even after taking office.

But his promise of "investing" in additional C-17s has since been taken off the White House website.

The plane is an important part of Boeing's business, generating \$8 billion a year in revenues. Boeing not only makes the planes, but also upgrades and maintains them. The Chicago company was the 12th-biggest spender on lobbying last year, spending \$16.6 million, according

to watchdog group Center for Responsive Politics.

Although parochial politics has been a driving force in funding the plane, its supporters say it also is important to national security.

"If it was not built in California, I'd still be in favor of it," said Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-Huntington Beach).

The plane's supporters have warned against "irreversibly" shutting down production before completion of a study on the Pentagon's airlift needs.

"We cannot ignore the fact that the C-17 is the last remaining strategic airlift production line in the nation, and shutting down this line prematurely may prove costly for the American taxpayer," a bipartisan group of senators said in a letter to appropriators.

Still, not all members of the California congressional delegation support continued funding for the plane.

"I am not going to support C-17 or any other project just because it happens to be built in my backyard," said Rep. John Campbell (R-Irvine).

Top Air Force leaders said Thursday that they simply do not need more cargo planes and that they had far more pressing priorities on which to spend money.

The Air Force chief of staff, Gen. Norton A. Schwartz, said the Air Force has 316 large transport aircraft, including the C-17 and C-5 fleets.

A 2005 study said that inventory was sufficient, and a new study expected to be completed in

the fall probably would reach the same conclusion, Schwartz said. "I would simply say too much aluminum is almost as bad as not enough," he said.

Air Force Secretary Michael B. Donley said if more air mobility was needed it would be cheaper to modernize more of the older C-5 aircraft than build new planes.

"There are more cost-effective alternatives to the taxpayer than buying more C-17s," Donley said.

The Air Force has ordered 205 planes in all and has taken delivery of 186 so far.

Thompson predicted that Congress would provide money for more C-17s. "The question is how many," he said.