

Panel OKs releasing JFK files

Two GOP restriction bids lose

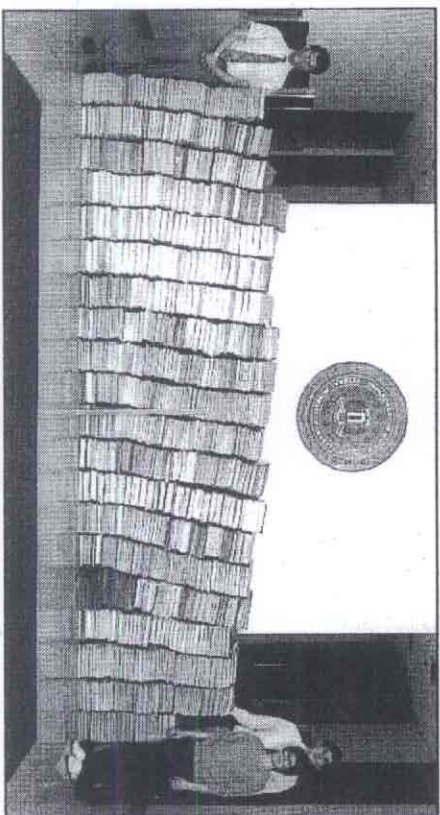
By JOHN DIAMOND
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A House panel unanimously approved legislation Thursday to release secret records dealing with the assassination of President Kennedy. Whether the documents hold new information remains to be seen.

The Judiciary Committee's economic and commercial law subcommittee gave the legislation its first favorable vote after defeating two Republican amendments that would have increased executive branch control over government secrets.

The bill would set up a judicially appointed citizens' review board to examine all secret government material on the assassination and recommend what should be released. The president could withhold documents on national security or privacy grounds.

The mountain of secret material, held by Congress, federal



Justice Department clerks pose earlier this year with FBI documents on President John F. Kennedy's assassination. File contains nearly 500,000 pages.

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agencies, libraries and archives, contains everything from autopsy photographs and top secret intelligence reports to newspaper clippings and tax returns.

Scholars, journalists and assassination experts will surely pore over the records as they become public. But some doubt they will turn up anything new since several congressional investigatory panels have already had full access to the files.

"There might be little fragments of information," said Dick Billings, co-author of a book on

the assassination. "I don't expect to see any major revelations."

The Warren Commission concluded in 1964 that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, had killed Kennedy. Conspiracy theories have abounded ever since.

"Is there going to be a smoking gun? No," said Jeff Goldberg, a journalist who wrote extensively on conspiracy theories. "Is there stuff... that's going to be historically interesting? Undoubtedly."

In Thursday's subcommittee meeting, Hamilton Fish, R-N.Y., proposed one amendment that

would give the president, rather than the federal courts, power to appoint the review board. A second Fish amendment would have given the White House broader discretion to protect confidential intelligence sources.

Jack Brooks, D-Texas, chairman of both the subcommittee and full Judiciary Committee, argued against the Fish proposals.

White House or congressional involvement in the review process, Brooks said, "would fundamentally reduce this bill's ability to deal with America's distrust of the government" and "would allow skeptics to continue to wave their conspiracy theories."

Brooks was riding in the Dallas motorcade on Nov. 22, 1963, when Kennedy was shot.

The amendment to give the president the appointment power was defeated in an 8-7 vote. But John Conyers, D-Mich., predicted the final bill will likely allow President Bush to name the review board with the consent of the Senate. Conyers, a Judiciary Committee member, is also chairman of the House Government Operations Committee, which is considering the JFK bill separately.

Thursday's action moves the measure to the full Judiciary panel.