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Gingrich's re-election as speaker questionable

WASHINGTON (AP) - A growing number of House Republicans say they're not ready to support Newt Gingrich's re-election as speaker even as GOP leaders issue pleas to unite solidly behind him despite his ethical lapses.

At least eight Republicans said they won't commit their votes until they get more information about Mr. Gingrich's confession to rules violations. Some said they want a House ethics committee recommendation on punishment before the speaker's vote Jan. 7.

"I just think it's premature to get too far out in front at this point," said Rep.-elect John Thune, R-S.D., liaison for GOP freshmen to the House leadership. Mr. Thune said he won't make a decision until the ethics committee finishes its work and makes a recommendation.

None of the Republicans said Mr. Gingrich has lost their votes. Still, Republicans control the House 227-208, so if 20 members say simply "present" - meaning they aren't voting - Mr. Gingrich could lose his job.

The collective Republican leadership has written all GOP members that Mr. Gingrich owned up to his mistakes and said his errors were not serious enough to deny him a second term.

Last week, Mr. Gingrich admitted violating House rules by failing to seek legal advice on use of tax-exempt activities for political purposes and of providing inaccurate statements to the committee.

Mr. Thune, despite his own uncertainty, predicted Mr. Gingrich would win in the end. "I think there's an expectation there that he will be elected speaker and that people will fall in line behind him," Mr. Thune said. "I haven't detected any sign of defection at all."

Nonetheless, Republicans awaiting the committee's guidance may have a dilemma Jan. 7, because Democrats are pursuing a strategy that would delay a recommendation for punishment until after the vote. The Democrats want to keep Mr. Gingrich under a cloud a while longer.

Mr. Gingrich is hoping for nothing worse than a reprimand, a House vote that would admonish him for wrongdoing but allow him to retain

his speakership. If the House supports a more serious censure resolution, party rules would prevent him from serving as speaker.

The Committee on Standards of Official Conduct - the ethics committee's formal name - must hold a hearing on sanctions before making a recommendation. At least one Democratic committee member isn't due back from vacation until Jan. 5 - only two days before the speaker's vote.

Gingrich's spokesman, Tony Blankley, said he's not worried. "A statement by (Majority Leader Dick) Arney that he expected a unanimous vote is the best indicator of what the vote will probably be," Mr. Blankley said.

Mr. Blankley said wavering Republicans are just waiting for "all the facts before making a definite statement." He predicted, "If Democrats decide to be overtly partisan, that will firm up Republican votes."