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Clean-air compromise moves to Senate

WASHINGTON - Senate leaders and President Bush compromised Thursday on future air pollution controls for automobiles, factories and electric power plants, enhancing chances that a clean air bill will pass this year.

The agreement, after more than three weeks of closed-door negotiations, was viewed as a middle ground likely to attract enough support to thwart continuing regional opposition in the looming Senate debate.

Majority Leader George Mitchell, D-Maine, called the compromise a "sound and comprehensive" agreement that will substantially improve air quality over the next decade. He planned to bring the legislation to the Senate floor on Monday.

"President Bush is extraordinarily pleased with the agreement. It is a milestone, an enormous step forward," said Roger Porter, the president's chief domestic policy adviser.

Porter said the administration would attempt to expedite Senate passage and seek a similar agreement in the House, where clean-air legislation remains in committee.

But the compromise is still likely to encounter stiff industry lobbying, largely because of its estimated \$20 billion to \$40 billion annual cost to the economy.

Some senators also have expressed concern that the bargaining weakened provisions in the original Senate

bill that would have required stronger automobile emission controls to combat urban smog. Other have voiced continued concern about the impact of acid rain controls.

Sen. Bob Dole, R-Kan., the minority leader, called the compromise "a giant step forward" in revising federal air pollution laws for the first time in 13 years. But he cautioned that many senators likely will seek changes when the measure goes to the Senate floor.

He urged Mitchell "not to handcuff anyone" during the floor action by rushing to cut off debate.

The agreement made some accommodations to regional interests, especially those concerned about the local economic cost of acid rain controls.

On that score, the compromise continues to require a 10 million ton annual reduction of sulfur dioxide emissions, but allows Midwest utilities to achieve special credits that could be sold to other utilities to recoup some of the costs. Plants that use new technology -- instead of switching away from high-sulfur coal to another fuel -- would receive additional credits for early cuts in emissions, a provision designed to help West Virginia's coal industry.

About a dozen senators from the Midwest had threatened to filibuster the legislation if some accommodation were not met to ease their concerns about the high costs of the pollution controls.

Mitchell said he still could not discount the threat of a filibuster, but various Senate sources suggested that with the compromise, Mitchell likely would have enough votes to halt debate.

Sen. Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., said he would seek additional changes to the bill. But "I'm not going to engage in any filibuster," he said.

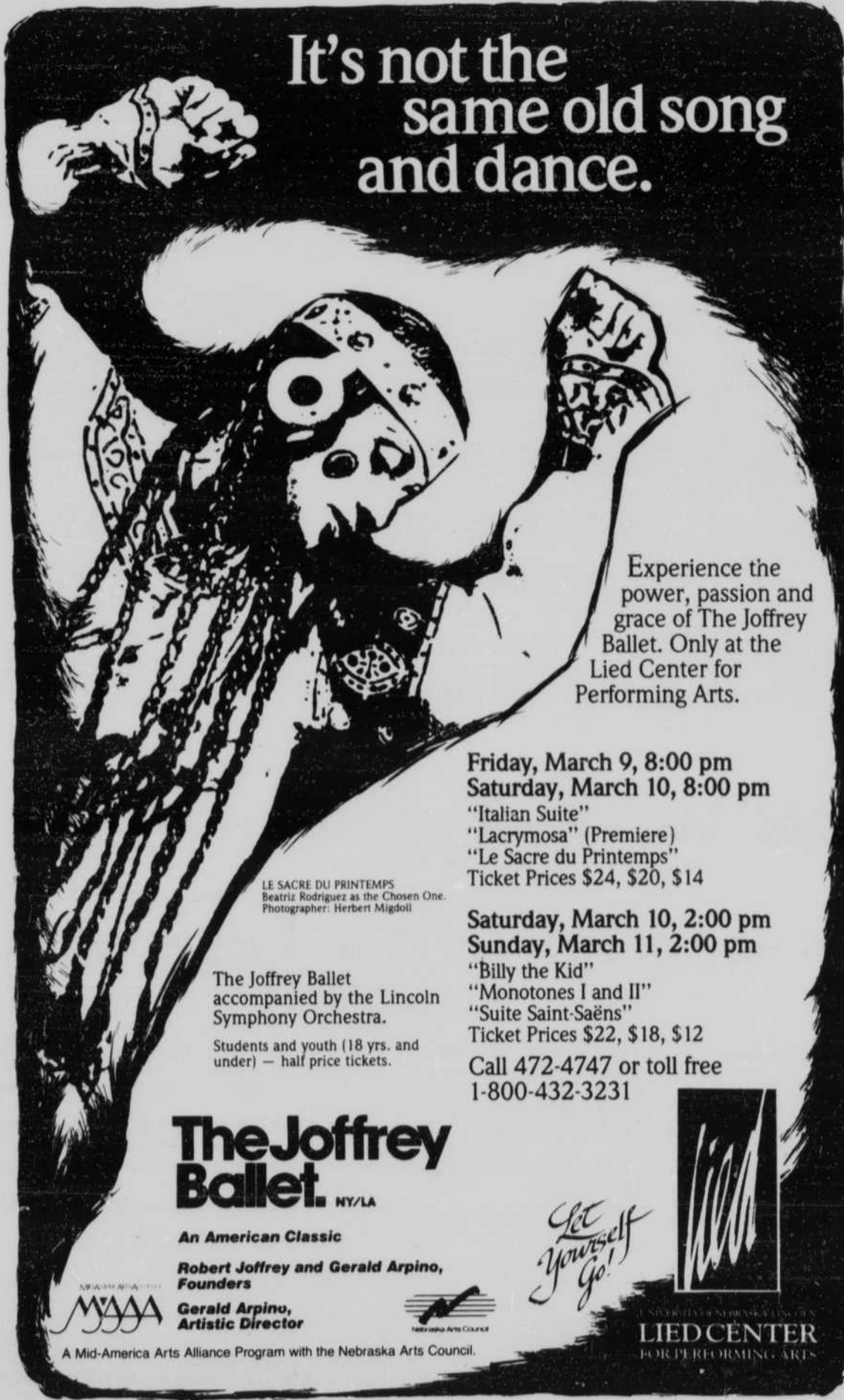
The breakthrough on the legislation came Wednesday when leaders agreed on pollution curbs on automobiles.

The compromise eliminates an automatic second round of auto tailpipe controls, although such measures could be put into effect if more than 11 of 27 cities with "serious" ozone pollution problems fail to meet federal air quality standards at the end of this decade.

The White House had strongly opposed the second round of controls, as had the auto industry. But environmentalists, state pollution control officials in areas with the dirtiest air, and some senators argued the second round of controls are needed to deal with smog in such areas as southern California and the Northeast.

In the final days of negotiations, an agreement also came on the acid rain provision, after senators from the West were assured that the utility emission controls would allow for future growth in electric capacity and some accommodation was made to the Midwest region.

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