

Senate Contempt Charge Expected Against Website Accused of Sex Trafficking

Photo



Senator Rob Portman at the Lincoln Day dinner in Hillsboro, Ohio, in February. Credit Ty Wright for The New York Times

As the Senate wraps up its business before a two-week recess beginning on Thursday after a mixed period of modest lawmaking and partisan scraps, lawmakers are expected to agree on one thing: a website known for its connections to the sex-trafficking business should be held in contempt of Congress, the first time the Senate has taken such an action in over two decades.

A congressional investigation — led by Senators Rob Portman, Republican of Ohio, and Claire McCaskill, Democrat of Missouri — found that the website, Backpage.com, changed some of its adult classified ads to conceal the fact that the advertisements were for sex with minors.

The two lawmakers, who lead the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, subpoenaed documents that Backpage refused to turn over, they said. Carl Ferrer, the chief executive, was subpoenaed by a Senate subcommittee in October to answer questions about reported child sex-trafficking ads, but he did not attend.

If approved by the full Senate, the resolution would be the first in two decades in which the Senate has had such a contempt decree; in 1995, William H. Kennedy III, the former associate counsel for President Clinton, faced similar action.

Backpage has come under fire in various jurisdictions over sex-trafficking charges, which it has vigorously fought. Hundreds of cases of trafficking across the nation have been linked to the site.

Visa and MasterCard have said they will no longer let cardholders make purchases on the classified advertising website, after Sheriff Thomas J. Dart of Cook County, Ill., accused the site of allowing its ads to promote prostitution and child trafficking. Backpage accused Mr. Dart of pressuring the credit companies; he said he was only educating the companies and the public.

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