

ECONOMY

Bessent tells lawmakers Musk's DOGE does not control Treasury payments system

The remarks came during a two-hour gathering between the Treasury secretary and GOP members of the House Financial Services Committee.



Scott Bessent stands at the end of his confirmation hearing to be Secretary of the Treasury in front of the Senate Finance committee in Washington, on Jan. 16, 2025. | Angelina Katsanis/POLITICO

By JASPER GOODMAN and MICHAEL STRATFORD
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Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent privately reassured Republican lawmakers Monday that Elon Musk and his team do not have control over a sensitive government system that manages the flow of trillions of dollars in payments, according to five lawmakers in the room for a closed-door meeting on Capitol Hill.

Bessent's comments came amid a growing controversy over Musk's efforts to gain access to vast swaths of the federal government. Bessent sparked an uproar over the weekend by [granting Musk's government efficiency team](#)

[access](#) to the payments network following a dispute that led to the sudden resignation of Treasury's top career official. Democrats have blasted the move as unprecedented political interference with how the federal government disburses funds.

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The remarks, relayed by lawmakers in the room who were granted anonymity to discuss a closed-door meeting, came during a two-hour gathering between Bessent and GOP members of the House Financial Services Committee Monday night that included a reception and dinner.

Bessent declined to comment on the matter exiting the gathering.

Rep. Andy Barr (R-Ky.), a senior Republican on the Financial Services panel, said in an interview following the dinner that Bessent's presentation was "very reassuring" to GOP lawmakers.

"Treasury has control of the Treasury payments system," Barr said. He added that Musk's DOGE team is focused on "reviewing the process to make sure there's accountability, transparency, traceability, and making sure that there's not lost payments, missing payments, hemorrhaging of taxpayer funds."

House Financial Services Chair French Hill (R-Ark.) said in an interview following the dinner that "the idea that DOGE is going to make efficiency recommendations and offer recommendations on how to more effectively use IT systems for reducing fraud, enhancing payment reliability, enhancing payment accuracy and timeliness — those are good suggestions."

"They require, obviously, the work of the department and, where necessary, the approval of Congress if it requires legislative action," Hill said. "But the fact that the people are offering that analysis across the government is one of the advantages of outside looks to improving government operations."



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Democrats railed against the Trump administration opening up access to the federal government's payment system to Musk allies, decrying the move as an illegal way to stop funding Congress has already approved. They said it jeopardizes payments on which millions of Americans depend and exposes their personal banking information and identifiable data to Musk's team.

"Elon just grabbed the controls of our whole payment system, demanding the power to turn it on for his friends or turn it off for anyone he doesn't like," Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) said on Monday. "One guy deciding who gets paid and who doesn't."

Sen. Patty Murray, the top Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Committee, rejected the idea that Musk allies' access to the payments system was as limited as Republicans and the administration are claiming.

"Why on earth should we believe that, particularly when he is saying the exact opposite, loudly and repeatedly for everyone to see?" Murray said.

Musk in recent days has said on X that his DOGE team was “rapidly shutting down” payments to Lutheran charities that provide refugee services. Musk also suggested — without offering any evidence — that career Treasury officials were breaking the law in approving some payments and had approved payments to known fraudulent organizations and terrorist groups.

Federal employee unions earlier on Monday [asked a federal court](#) to block Musk’s team from accessing the vast government databases.

But Bessent reassured lawmakers that Musk and his team do not have control over key Treasury systems.

“The secretary is in control of all aspects of Treasury,” said one GOP lawmaker who was in the room for the gathering who was granted anonymity to discuss sensitive information relayed in a closed-door meeting.

Barr said Bessent also discussed with lawmakers financial regulation and Bessent’s new role as the acting director of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, among other issues.

Other Republican lawmakers on Monday also brushed aside criticism from Democrats that Musk and his team could abuse access to the system to shutter payments that Americans rely on.

“It’s important for them to be able to know what is being spent — and make certain it’s being spent A, the way Congress intended, and B, the way the President would want it to be spent,” said Sen. Bernie Moreno (R-Ohio). “Sometimes you have to go into the actual disbursement system, because that way you don’t get misinformation, which a lot of bureaucrats do.”

Katherine Hapgood contributed to this report.

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