Consumers might also have to cut back on spending if Congress doesn't extend a Social Security tax cut or emergency federal unemployment benefits.

WASHINGTON (AP) -- Americans spent more on autos, furniture and clothing at the start of the crucial holiday shopping season, boosting retail sales for a sixth straight month.

Retail sales rose 0.2 percent in November, the Commerce Department said Tuesday. That's lower than October's gain, which was revised higher to show a 0.6 percent increase. Still, more spending on retail goods shows the economy continues to grow at a slow but steady pace.

Consumers appeared to make more big purchases in November. They spent more on electronics, appliances and autos. So-called core sales, which exclude autos, gasoline and building materials, rose for the 11th straight month.

Meanwhile, sales fell at grocery stores, building supply stores and restaurants.

"People decided to go to the store and do their shopping rather than to the restaurant," Jonathan Basile, an economist at Credit Suisse.

The report is the government's first read on monthly consumer spending, which accounts for 70 percent of economic activity.

A rebound in consumer spending helped revive the economy this summer after it slumped in the spring. Economists expect consumers have helped boost growth even further in the final three months of the year.

Paul Dales, a senior U.S. economist at Capital Economics, said the modest retail sales gain last month should come as a surprise. He notes that the larger spending increases over the summer came after consumers dipped into their savings to make up for smaller gains in their income.

"November's modest rise could therefore be the start of a period in which households start to spend more within their means," Dales said.

Still, Americans spent $52.4 billion over the Thanksgiving holiday weekend, according to the National Retail Federation. The record amount was spurred by deep discounts and early store openings.

Sales for 21 chain stores rose last month, the International Council of Shopping Centers said.

Online holiday sales are also growing, although they are expected to peak this week. Many shoppers tend to complete orders by mid-month to allow time for presents to be shipped.

Merchants can make up to 40 percent of their annual revenue during the holiday shopping season, which includes November and December.

Automakers have also reported strong sales for November. Chrysler, Ford, Nissan and Hyundai reported double-digit sales gains. November is usually a lackluster month for auto sales because of cold weather. But automakers offered steep discounts and many consumers can't wait any longer to replace their aging vehicles.

Auto sales have rebounded from the spring, when the Japan earthquake and tsunami slowed supply chains and limited production at U.S. plants.

Consumers are spending more after cutting back earlier this year in the face of higher food and gas prices. That's a key reason economists forecast that growth should pick up to about 3 percent in the fourth quarter, which would be the fastest pace in 18 months.

More demand has helped boost hiring. Employers added a net total of 120,000 jobs last month. The economy has generated 100,000 or more jobs five months in a row - the first time that has happened since April 2006.

Still, many economists question how long consumers can continue increasing their spending without more jobs and higher pay. Unemployment remains high, and inflation-adjusted incomes shrank in the July-September quarter.

Consumers might also have to cut back on spending if Congress doesn't extend a Social Security tax cut or emergency federal unemployment benefits. Both expire at the end of this year. The Social Security tax this year boosted take-home pay for the average family by $1,000.

Economists also fear that Europe's debt crisis could worsen and plunge the region into a recession. That could slow demand for U.S. exports, tighten lending and make it harder for

U.S.
businesses to expand.