

Senate marks opening day on immigration policy

by Jerry Kammer

WASHINGTON - Congress and the White House are set to begin another rancorous season of immigration debate this week as two Bush administration officials travel to Capitol Hill to make the president's case for legalizing millions of illegal immigrants and welcoming potentially millions of temporary workers in the future.

Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff and Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez are scheduled to appear Wednesday before the Senate Judiciary Committee, the starting point for the sweeping immigration reform bill that passed the Senate last year before slamming against a wall of angry Republican opposition in the House.

"It's opening day" for immigration reform, said Frank Sharry, a leader of the left-right coalition that unites liberal Hispanic rights groups, labor unions and church organizations with an array of business interests clamoring for wider access to low-wage workers.

The always-volatile politics of immigration policy took a big turn in last year's elections as Democrats, historically aligned with the liberal groups who seek to expand immigration, took control of both houses of Congress.

Many Democratic candidates won after taunting the "do-nothing Republican Congress" for its failure to manage immigration and its passage of legislation to build a border fence for which funding was not made available.

"That became a laugh line to show how ridiculous Republicans were," said Sharry, executive director of the National Immigration Forum.

But the leader of a Washington think tank that argues for restrictions on immigration says that if House Speaker Nancy Pelosi wants to preserve the newly won Democratic majority, she will need to move cautiously on immigration. While a sweeping legalization measure would appeal to much of the party's base, it could endanger the seats of newly elected Democrats, said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies. He prefers to call legalization "amnesty," a loaded term shunned by immigrant advocates who speak of "earned adjustment."

"A big amnesty would be a big problem for the Democrats who won in swing districts," Krikorian said. "In the next election, challengers would be able to run against the 'left-wing Nancy Pelosi amnesty.'"

Many of those swing districts are in areas of the country where there is widespread alarm at the rapid growth in the nation's population of illegal immigrants - estimated at 12 million and growing at about 500,000 per year.

Mindful of the issue's volatility, Rep. Rahm Emanuel, chairman of the House Democratic Caucus, has said he expects the Bush administration to persuade at least 85 Republicans to vote for the sweeping legalization measure.

"They're going after Republicans because they know they're going to have to give some of their own members a bye when this comes up for a vote," said Rep. Tom Tancredo, R-Colo., who is weighing a 2008 presidential bid to showcase his hard-line stance against illegal immigration.

Tancredo said the Bush administration is trumpeting its ramped-up enforcement measures at the border and at job sites in order to win the votes of reluctant members. "They want to tell Congress, 'We've done our job, now you do yours with a guest worker program,'" Tancredo said. "My message is that as soon as you give them a guest worker program, that will be the end of enforcement."

Partisans on both sides of the issue are waiting for President Bush to make a clear statement of his position on one of the most controversial issues before Congress: Should workers who come to the United States on future guest worker visas be put on a path to citizenship or required to return home?

"He has been deliberately ambiguous on that one," said Sharry, pointing to presidential statements over the past several years that have called for Congress to "match willing workers with willing employers," without stating the terms of such an arrangement.

But White House spokesman Scott Stanzel this week that such a program "must be truly temporary, so participation should be for a limited period of time and guest workers would have to return home" after a period set by Congress.

Tamar Jacoby, an immigration advocate and scholar at the conservative Manhattan Institute, said Congress must move on immigration reform before the fall, when the 2008 presidential election politics make leaders of both parties reluctant to move on such a controversial issue.

"I would say that it's a universal belief that if it doesn't happen by August, we're cooked," Jacoby said.

If a comprehensive measure fails, immigrant advocates might then look to less ambitious reforms, such as the so-called Agjobs bill that would provide a path to citizenship for hundreds of thousands of farm workers and their families, or the Dream Act, to provide a path to citizenship for persons who came illegally to the United States at an early age, many of them brought by their parents.

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