

Time running out on immigration reform

by Jerry Kammer

WASHINGTON - Despite pressure from Senate Republicans for more time to reach an agreement on immigration reform behind closed doors, Majority Leader Harry Reid is sticking to a pledge to open Senate debate this week. In the absence of a new proposal, he plans to use last year's Senate-passed bill as the starting point.

Reid's move raises the political stakes for Republicans, including presidential aspirant John McCain, who helped Democratic colleague Edward Kennedy drive last year's bill to passage. But now McCain has shied away from its expansive proposals to provide legal status for an estimated 12 million immigrants currently in the country illegally and open the door to more temporary foreign workers in the years ahead.

McCain, mindful that the conservative Republicans who will be crucial in next year's primaries tend to demand more border security and tighter immigration controls, has adopted a more cautious stance. He has joined other Republicans in urging Reid to allow closed-door, bipartisan talks to continue rather than picking up where the Senate ended last year.

"He wants a bill that is bipartisan and that ensures that border security is first," McCain spokeswoman Melissa Shuffield said Friday.

The latest congressional immigration drama is unfolding against a backdrop of frustration on all sides.

Illegal immigrants have taken to the streets across the nation demanding that their work be rewarded with green cards and a path to citizenship. Opponents have held rallies warning that such a step would simply fuel illegal immigration by showing that the United States is too divided to enforce its own immigration laws.

Meanwhile, some local governments have passed ordinances to punish those who provide jobs or housing to illegal immigrants, while other jurisdictions have offered sanctuary to illegal immigrants.

Congress is groping for a way to fix a system universally regarded as broken.

"To me, the crisis of confidence between the American people and its elected officials has never been greater, primarily because of illegal immigration," Rep. Peter King, R-NY, said last week.

The controversy swirls around key questions: How many immigrants? What kind? Who will benefit and who will lose under the reforms?

"One issue is that the benefits come mostly to interest groups, while the costs are widely diffused" throughout society, said Michael Teitelbaum, a demographer with the Alfred E. Sloan Foundation.

Frank Sharry of the National Immigration Forum, which advocates for expansive immigration policies, says federal policy should reflect the reality that employers depend on low-wage immigrant labor.

"The best way to serve the national interest is to allow people to come legally within realistic limits and to have a process by which people already here working and contributing can legalize their status," Sharry said.

For the past two months, the Bush administration has been attempting to broker a deal that would avoid the stalemate of last year, when the Senate passed a sweeping legalization bill while the House focused on measures to tighten the nation's borders.

Reform advocates are urging Congress to move quickly, warning that presidential politics and other pressing business might make it impossible for lawmakers to concentrate on the complex and divisive politics of immigration after the fall. But even in the Senate, the going has been rough because of differences between the pro-immigration ranks, led by Kennedy, D-Mass., and the restrictionists, led by Sen. Jon Kyl, R-Ariz. In a major concession, Kyl has indicated a willingness to consider legalization for the 12 million illegal immigrants now in the country.

But in return, Kyl demands that future temporary workers be required to go home after a fixed period. Kennedy wants them to have a guaranteed chance at a green card, which would put them on a path to citizenship.

Their divisions reflect a divide in their notion of how the current wave of immigrants fits into the historical narrative of immigration. The fundamental question: Will today's immigrants be able to repeat the upward climb achieved by previous waves?

Kennedy is optimistic.

"The values that immigrants bring, of hard work, family and faith, are values that strengthen our nation

enormously," he said.

He insists that the children of today's illegal immigrants will find the middle-class success that has long defined the American dream.

Kyl worries that the rising numbers of immigrants at the lowest rungs of the economy will harm citizens competing for the same jobs. He also worries that low-skilled immigrants could form a permanent underclass.

Some Republicans also want to overhaul a green card system that gives an enormous advantage to people related to U.S. citizens and green card holders. While they believe immediate family members should continue to be eligible for green cards, they do not believe adult children and siblings should get them based on family ties.

They want more visas for immigrants with specialized skills and abilities. Their proposal, floated in a White House draft proposal in March, brought an immediate reaction from the Asian-Americans and Latinos who have been the principal beneficiaries of the family-based system.

"This would undermine Asian-American communities," said Karen Narasaki, president of the Asian American Justice Center.

Republican strategists fear that if their side this week tries to keep Reid from getting the 60 votes he would need to open the debate with last year's bill, Democratic TV spots would brand them as anti-immigrant.

Meanwhile, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, hoping to head off possible Republican campaign spots denouncing a "Kennedy-Pelosi amnesty," has told the White House that it will have to deliver at least 70 Republican votes to any bill that comes to the House floor.

There is a broad feeling in Congress that the public expects action to manage a problem that has grown to what even longtime immigration advocate Rep. Howard Berman, D-Los Angeles, calls "a national crisis."

Much of the urgency comes from the sense of unease that has swept across the country over the past decade as illegal immigration, once an issue in a handful of states, has surged in such heartland regions as Iowa, Indiana and Georgia. The illegal immigrant population is now growing at about 500,000 per year, according to demographer Jeffrey Passell of the Pew Hispanic Center. That is part of a steady climb, from annual rates of

about 65,000 in the mid-1980s and 320,000 in the mid-1990s.

Meanwhile, Congress has taken a series of measures that have boosted legal immigration from 265,000 in 1960, to 373,000 in 1970, to 524,000 in 1980, to 1.26 million last year. Much of the recent increase can be traced to an amnesty in 1986 that gave green cards to 2.7 million illegal immigrants, who soon began sponsoring relatives for green cards.

Now, Kennedy and others are pushing for a legalization program that would dwarf the 1986 amnesty. With the legalized immigrants eligible to bring in relatives, the number of immigrants could soar above today's levels. Opponents say such growth, especially if it continues to draw from low-skilled, poorly educated immigrants, would become an enormous burden on taxpayers.

Robert Rector of the conservative Heritage Foundation said that families headed by people who - like millions of immigrants - lack a high school education, require social services worth far more than what they pay in taxes.

Immigration proposals like Kennedy's would be tantamount to a "welfare outreach program" to developing nations, Rector warns.

On the other side of the debate, Berman warns that allowing the population of undocumented immigrant population to grow beyond 12 million poses its own costs. "What is the cost of doing nothing?" Berman asks.

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