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Bush Aides Pledge Work for Immigration Bill

By RACHEL L. SWARNS

WASHINGTON, Feb. 28 — Two senior Bush administration officials vowed on Wednesday to work with Congress to ensure passage of immigration legislation this year but publicly distanced themselves from proposals that would place most illegal immigrants on a path to citizenship.

Commerce Secretary Carlos M. Gutierrez and Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff suggested that offering temporary legal status, instead of citizenship, to illegal immigrants would be enough to persuade them to emerge from the shadows and register with the government, which has been a key national security goal.

The officials were testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee as lawmakers worked out the final details of a broad immigration bill that could be introduced in the Senate as early as next week. Last year, the Senate passed bipartisan immigration legislation that would have provided citizenship to most illegal immigrants who paid fines and back taxes and learned English.

That legislation stalled in the face of fierce opposition from House Republicans, but this year's bill is expected to include a similar proposal. Democrats and Republicans believe that prospects for passage are far better in this Democratic-controlled Congress, but the contentious debate over citizenship underscores the difficulties ahead.

The citizenship measure has been derided by conservatives as amnesty and hailed by some Democrats, Republicans and immigrant advocates as a provision that will encourage millions of illegal immigrants to come forward. In August, President Bush suggested that he supported such proposals, saying they sounded like "a reasonable way to treat people with respect."

But on Wednesday, Mr. Gutierrez and Mr. Chertoff declined to endorse the measure. Mr. Gutierrez said many illegal immigrants might prefer working here for several years and returning home.

"That is something we need to discuss, we need to think through," Mr. Gutierrez said. "There is a path today to citizenship, so it is not as if we need to create a new path to citizenship."

"What people want first and foremost is legal status," he said. "I'm not sure everybody wants to be a U.S. citizen. Many just want to be able to work. And if they can work legally, one day they would like to go back home."

Mr. Chertoff noted that only about a third of the illegal immigrants granted legal status as a result of legislation passed in 1986 actually ended up applying for citizenship. "A significant majority did not become citizens," he said.

It was unclear whether the officials were simply trying to ease conservative concerns about the citizenship question or whether Mr. Bush had actually shifted his position. Scott Stanzel, a White House spokesman, said Mr. Bush still supported a path to citizenship that would include payments of fines back taxes and a requirement to learn English, among other things. But it seemed unlikely that the two cabinet secretaries would make such remarks without first consulting the White House.

But advocates for immigrants warned that legislation without a path to citizenship would be unacceptable to many Democrats and some Republicans. They also objected to another proposal suggested by Mr. Chertoff, which would limit judicial review of decisions made by immigration officials determining eligibility for the legalization program.

“Without the inclusion of a path to citizenship in a legalization program, you are essentially creating a permanent underclass in our country,” said Bishop Gerald Barnes of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Migration.

Lawmakers also highlighted other concerns. Senator Arlen Specter, the Pennsylvania Republican who was a key architect of last year’s bill, complained that he and other Republicans were being shut out of negotiations over the new legislation.

Meanwhile, Senator Dianne Feinstein, a California Democrat who supported the bill last year, said she now believed it was overly broad and susceptible to fraud.

Senator Patrick J. Leahy, the Vermont Democrat who is chairman of the Judiciary Committee, said Mr. Bush would have to ensure that lawmakers came together. “It’s not going to be an easy process,” Mr. Leahy said.