

Congress gears up for fierce showdown on immigration

Some lawmakers hope the issue can be resolved by midsummer

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By MICHELLE MITTELSTADT

Houston Chronicle Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Six weeks from now, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid intends for the Senate to kick off what's sure to be a contentious debate over fixing the nation's dysfunctional immigration system.

The Nevada Democrat says he's reserving the last two weeks of May to take up legislation that would have a powerful effect on employers and millions of immigrants, legal and illegal. But as that date nears, there's still no consensus among the differing factions, no bill and no plan yet for action in committee.

And last week's leak of a White House immigration draft that proposed less generous treatment for illegal immigrants and future arrivals than what's under consideration by Democrats further muddied the waters as both parties grope for an as-yet elusive compromise.

Plenty of interest

It's been a twisting, uncertain road for a high-stakes legislative issue that congressional Republicans and Democrats, the Bush administration, business, labor, immigrant-rights advocates and a horde of other special interests agree must be addressed this year.

"It is confusing," said Texas Sen. John Cornyn, the top Republican on the Senate immigration subcommittee and one of the key participants in talks with the administration. "It's hard to follow because there's a lot of different moving parts."

Still, Cornyn and others pressing for a fix say they remain confident that Congress can resolve the highly controversial topic by August — when conventional wisdom suggests the window for action will close as spending bills and the presidential campaign will capture lawmakers' attention and make compromise less palatable.

"We're not at a point where we need to be alarmed in my opinion," said Kevin Appleby, director of the Office of Migration and Refugee Programs at the U.S. Catholic Conference, a leading voice in the push to legalize the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants. "The process is moving forward."

The pace of talks has quickened in recent weeks after Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez were dispatched to Capitol Hill in hopes of bridging rifts among Senate Republicans.

The administration's involvement is welcomed by many as necessary to ensuring that the House and Senate don't become gridlocked on immigration as what happened last year.

"This is really the first time that the White House has been engaged at a detail level," said Craig Regelbrugge, co-chair of the Agriculture Coalition for Immigration Reform.

The GOP Senate talks were expanded last week to include some prominent Democrats. While Congress is in recess this week, negotiations are continuing, said Laura Capps, a

spokeswoman for Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., chairman of the Senate immigration subcommittee.

A White House draft resulting from the Republican talks sparked anxiety in immigrant-rights circles after it surfaced last week, both because it would make it far more costly for illegal immigrants to become citizens and wouldn't provide a clear path to permanent residence for guest workers. It also would reorder an immigration system that focuses predominantly on family reunification, instead placing new premium on immigrants' skills and limiting their ability to bring parents, siblings and adult children to the country.

"The White House plan was definitely a setback," said Angela Kelley, deputy director of the National Immigration Forum. "They were hoping to come up with a roadmap for lots of Republicans, and I think what they ended up realizing is they hit a dead end."

Some agreement

White House spokeswoman Dana Perino dismissed the draft as "discussion points and nothing concrete."

There is broad agreement between enforcement hawks and legalization-friendly lawmakers on key elements such as enhancing border security, increasing interior enforcement, creating an employment verification system and mandating the use of tamper-resistant IDs. The most contentious elements: the treatment of the illegal immigrants and the future flow of foreign workers to the U.S.

"We all pretty much have an idea what the range of options is, and we're getting down to the point where we are going to have to start choosing," Cornyn said.