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Conservatives Stand Firm on Immigration

By CARL HULSE and RACHEL L. SWARNS

WASHINGTON, March 30 — Conservative House Republicans bluntly warned their leaders Thursday against any immigration compromise that would allow temporary foreign workers and assailed a Senate proposal that would open the way for illegal immigrants to earn citizenship.

"My fear is that if we continue down this path that the Senate has established, that we will have created the biggest magnet ever," said Representative Bob Beauprez, a Colorado Republican. "It would be like a dinner bell, 'Come one, come all.' "

But the bipartisan authors of a Senate plan that would combine new border protections with a temporary worker program and a process for illegal immigrants to qualify for residency and eventually citizenship said they thought they were gaining support as the Senate moved deeper into its immigration fight.

Senator John McCain, the Arizona Republican who helped write the plan approved Monday by the Senate Judiciary Committee, called the debate a defining moment in the nation's history.

"Are we going to continue our rich tradition of hundreds of years of welcoming new blood and new vitality to our nation?" Mr. McCain asked. "Or are we going to adopt a protectionist, isolationist attitude and policies that are in betrayal of the very fundamentals of this great nation of ours, a beacon of hope and liberty and freedom throughout the world?"

Supporters of Mr. McCain's plan said that President Bush's comments in recent days have suggested he was moving toward their position. Under Mr. McCain's proposal, illegal immigrants would be granted permanent residency and the opportunity to apply for citizenship only after foreigners who have followed the rules by applying for residency from their countries have been processed.

In a speech on Thursday in Cancún, Mexico, where President Bush was meeting with President Vicente Fox, Mr. Bush said, "If they want to become a citizen, they can get in line, but not the head of the line."

The sharp divisions among Republicans illustrated the difficulty Congress would have in reaching agreement, particularly with midterm elections looming. Lawmakers and Senate officials said the climactic votes would come next week as senators considered amendments and a choice between the Judiciary Committee plan and a proposal by Senator Bill Frist, the majority leader, that focuses on tougher law enforcement.

As the debate rages in Washington, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and the Pew Hispanic Center released a national survey indicating that ordinary Americans are also deeply divided over how to handle the 11 million illegal immigrants thought to be living in the United States.

The poll, conducted between Feb. 8 and March 7, found that 53 percent of the 2,000 people surveyed believed that illegal immigrants should be required to return home, while 40 percent said they should be granted some legal status that allows them to stay in the United States.

Forty-nine percent said that increasing penalties for employers who hire illegal immigrants would be most effective in reducing illegal immigration. One-third preferred increasing the number of border patrol agents while 9 percent favored the construction of fences along the Mexican border.

And while 65 percent said that immigrants mostly take jobs that Americans do not want, the survey found that a growing number of people believe immigrants are a burden, taking jobs and housing and creating strains on health care.

House conservatives emphasized such concerns at a news conference on Thursday. Worried that their party's leadership was weakening in its opposition to plans that would allow illegal workers to remain in the United

States, more than a dozen House members staged a "Say No to Amnesty" event after Speaker J. Dennis Hastert suggested on Wednesday that the House might consider a temporary worker program.

Representative Dana Rohrabacher, Republican of California, dismissed arguments made by President Bush and business leaders who say the United States needs a pool of foreign workers. He said businesses should be more creative in their efforts to find help and suggested that employers turn to the prison population to fill jobs in agriculture and elsewhere.

"Let the prisoners pick the fruits," Mr. Rohrabacher said. "We can do it without bringing in millions of foreigners."

With the Senate considering a worker and citizenship plan starkly at odds with the House approach, Representative Tom Tancredo, Republican of Colorado and a leading advocate of tough immigration laws, said House conservatives wanted to make clear their resistance to any worker program. "Push is coming to shove," Mr. Tancredo said.

Despite the outcry from the right, Representative John A. Boehner, the majority leader, said the House would await a bill from the Senate before making firm decisions. "To stand here today and guess at what it might look like and how we might deal with an issue is a lot of speculation that we don't need to engage in," Mr. Boehner said.

While backers of the bipartisan measure said they were making inroads, opponents of the citizenship proposal said they were not so sure. "The more people find out what is in it, I think there will be more unease," said Senator Jeff Sessions, Republican of Alabama. Like other critics of the legislation, Mr. Sessions said it could be characterized as amnesty for illegal immigrants.

Authors of the measure bristled at that label. Senator Arlen Specter, Republican of Pennsylvania and chairman of the Judiciary Committee, described it as a smear intended to build resistance to the legislation.

"It is not amnesty because the undocumented aliens will have to pay a fine," he said. "They will have to pay back taxes. They will undergo a thorough background investigation. They will have to learn English. They will have to work for six years. And they will have to earn the status of staying in the country and the status of moving toward citizenship."