

GOP backs Bush on guest-worker plan

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The Republican National Committee voted yesterday to back President Bush's call for a guest-worker program.

Meeting a few blocks from the White House at the Capital Hilton, the umbrella organization of the Republican Party adopted a resolution that calls for continued legal immigration, criticizes illegal immigration and endorses a new work program for foreign workers. However, the resolution states there should be "no amnesty for those persons presently in the United States illegally."

"The question is not 'Is there an issue?' -- the question is 'How you deal with it?' and I think we have to deal with it in a comprehensive way -- we don't have to deal with it in a way that's anti-immigrant," said party Chairman Ken Mehlman, who said the resolution "reflected where the president was."

The resolution, adopted by voice vote, was a major victory for Mr. Mehlman and headed off a divisive vote on an alternate resolution that would have put the party on record as opposing a guest-worker program, thus at odds with Mr. Bush.

Randy Pullen, Arizona's committeeman, had gained enough signatures from fellow RNC members to force a vote on a version that specifically opposed a guest-worker program.

But after the pro-guest worker resolution passed Mr. Pullen withdrew his plan from the floor.

"Sometimes you've got to know when you've lost and move on," Mr. Pullen said afterward. He said he was not pressured to withdraw his resolution. He was the only RNC member to say "no" during the vote on the pro-guest worker resolution.

He said he has yet to see a guest-worker plan that doesn't amount to amnesty, and said Mr. Bush has his work cut out for him trying to explain how he can craft such a plan.

"The president wants a guest-worker program -- if that's what he thinks needs to be done, he's going to have to articulate to the Republican Party exactly what that plan means. I haven't heard it yet," he said.

Mr. Mehlman said amnesty "would mean that people who have broken the law are not punished for breaking the law."

He said that bills in Congress "have different definitions," but said Mr. Bush and the Republican Party oppose amnesty because "the effect of that would be to say people who have waited in line [that they] have to wait behind people who haven't waited in line."

Some Republicans have said the president has sent mixed messages on the issue, because in 2004 he said his plan would "preserve the citizenship path" for illegal aliens.

The House last month passed an immigration-enforcement bill that did not include a guest-worker program. The Senate is expected to take up immigration legislation early this year, and leaders expect it will contain some sort of guest-worker program and possibly a path to citizenship for illegal aliens.

Rep. Tom Tancredo, Colorado Republican and a major opponent of a guest-worker program, said yesterday's RNC vote signals a tough fight ahead.

"The RNC's failure to pass a get-tough border security resolution shows the extent to which the White House will use strong-arm tactics to secure an amnesty," he said. "If this is any preview of what the president will do with the House bill, he should prepare himself for one heck of a fight."

Mr. Pullen circulated his resolution last year and obtained nine co-sponsors from different states -- enough to bypass the party's Resolutions Committee and force the resolution directly to a full floor vote. Fearing that, other Republicans crafted the pro guest-worker resolution as an alternative.

Saulius "Saul" Anuzis, committeeman from Michigan, said the specifics of an immigration solution should be left to the lawmakers.

"The president has made it very clear where he wants to go, and I think we as the Republican National Committee owe it to the president and Congress to come up with a resolution that is broad enough and states the principle we stand for, to allow the legislative process to work it out," he said.