

House G.O.P. Leaders Delay Action on Immigration

By CARL HULSE

WASHINGTON, June 20 — House Republican leaders today put the brakes on efforts to overhaul immigration laws, saying they would hold hearings this summer around the nation on the politically volatile subject before trying to compromise with the Senate on a chief domestic priority of President Bush.

"We are going to listen to the American people, and we are going to get a bill that is right," said Speaker J. Dennis Hastert, Republican of Illinois, who said he had informed Mr. Bush of the plan.

The unusual decision to set a new round of hearings on legislation already passed by the House of Representatives and the Senate puts the prospects for enacting a final bill this year in jeopardy despite Mr. Bush's call for Congress to act.

The timing means that formal Congressional negotiations would not begin until September, just as Congressional campaigns are entering their crucial final weeks — a time when lawmakers typically shy away from difficult issues.

"I don't know how likely that is," said Representative Roy Blunt of Missouri, the House Republican whip, about reaching agreement before November. He suggested final consideration might have to wait for a lame-duck session after the election. "We clearly are going to be here later in the year," Mr. Blunt said.

But advancing significant legislation in lame-duck sessions has proven difficult in the past. If Congress does not act this year, the House and Senate will have to begin anew in 2007 if lawmakers still want to pursue immigration changes.

A White House spokeswoman said Mr. Bush would continue to press for legislation. "The president is undeterred in his efforts to pass a comprehensive immigration reform bill," said the spokeswoman, Dana Perino, who added that the White House was "committed to working with members to see if we can reach a consensus on a bill that will help solve our nation's immigration problems."

The leadership decision reflected the deep resistance among House Republicans to the bipartisan approach approved in May by the Senate and generally endorsed by Mr. Bush. That bill combined new border enforcement with a program for temporary guest workers and the ability of illegal immigrants to qualify for citizenship by meeting a series of requirements.

House Republicans late last year passed their own party-line bill that focused solely on border enforcement. They say a majority of the public backs their approach and many House Republicans consider the Senate bill to be amnesty for those who have entered the country illegally.

"Our No. 1 priority is to secure the border and right now I haven't heard a lot of pressure to have a path to citizenship," Mr. Hastert said.

In a swipe at the Senate version, Representative Deborah Pryce of Ohio, a senior member of the Republican leadership, labeled the legislation the "Kennedy bill" — a dismissive reference to Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts, who helped write the measure in cooperation with Republicans including Senators Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania and John McCain of Arizona.

Those lawmakers held out hope today that a final bill could still be completed this year, and they said they accepted the House position that more scrutiny of the issue was required. "I respect their views, and I hope that we can still continue discussions and hopefully we can reach an agreement," Mr. McCain said.

But another proponent warned that voters might ultimately punish Republicans if they are unable to come up with a solution to a pressing national problem.

"The question is, is it better to solve the issue before the election or is it better to make people mad and do nothing," said Senator Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina. "I think it is hard to go to the electorate when you have the White House, the Senate and the House and say that you cannot at least go through the effort of trying to get a bill. That would to me be a sign of inability to govern."

Democrats were highly critical, with Mr. Kennedy accusing House Republicans of a "cynical effort to delay or kill a comprehensive immigration bill."

Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, the Democratic leader, said Republicans were stalling and he called on Mr. Bush to prod members of his party. "He has complete domination over this Republican Congress," Mr. Reid said. "Let him tell us how much he really wants a bill."

The focus of the summer hearings and the schedule was uncertain today as Republicans suggested the hearings would be used both to explore the content of the Senate bill as well as to survey public opinion on the issue. But it was clear that House Republicans intended to use the forums to try to expose what they see as failings in the Senate bill and build public opposition to that approach.

"The House bill is very different than the Senate bill, and I think we want to have a clear understanding of what is in that bill," said Representative John A. Boehner of Ohio, the House majority leader.

The hearings could also help House Republicans rally conservative supporters in advance of the election, particularly given a recent special election in Southern California that saw immigration emerge as a dominant election issue. But Representative Thomas M. Reynolds of New York, the chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee, said today that the issue's power varied from district to district.

"It is not, in my view, a situation that has the same resonance in each district," he said.