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Senate Rejects Changes in Immigration Bill

By ROBERT PEAR

WASHINGTON, May 24 — - The Senate narrowly rejected two proposals today that would have upset the delicate compromise embodied in a bipartisan bill to overhaul the nation's immigration laws.

In both cases, the vote was 49 to 48.

One proposal would have ended a proposed guest worker program after five years. The other proposal would have encouraged state and local government employees to help enforce federal immigration laws.

The purpose of the second proposal was to prevent cities from offering any type of sanctuary to illegal immigrants.

The bill, a product of secret negotiations between the White House and a dozen senators, has survived four days of impassioned debate on the Senate floor. But it is unclear whether the legislation has gained enough momentum to survive continuing attacks from the left and the right.

Senators are scheduled to leave for home on Friday for a weeklong recess over the Memorial Day holiday. Many said they expected to get angry questions from constituents upset with a provision of the bill that offers legal status to the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants.

Architects of the bill said they were pleased.

"We made progress this week," said Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts, the chief Democratic sponsor of the bill. But he quickly added that he foresaw "difficult and challenging times ahead."

A co-author of the bill, Senator Mel Martinez, Republican of Florida, said: "It's been a good week. The bill is moving forward."

Senator Arlen Specter, Republican of Pennsylvania, said the architects of the bill were confident that they could deal with any "roadblocks, poison pills or killer amendments" that might be offered when the Senate continues work on the bill in June.

At a news conference today, President Bush urged the Senate to pass the measure and insisted that it did not provide amnesty to lawbreakers, as many conservatives have asserted.

“I knew this was going to be an explosive issue,” Mr. Bush said. “We’ve been through immigration debates in this country, and they can bring out the worst, sometimes, in people.”

Defending the guest worker program, Mr. Bush said, “I would much rather have people crossing the border with a legitimate card, coming to work on a temporary basis, than being stuffed in back of an 18-wheeler.”

The proposal encouraging state and local employees to help enforce the immigration laws was offered by Senator Norm Coleman, Republican of Minnesota. It said state and local employees could ask people about their immigration status whenever the employees had “probable cause” to believe that the people were not legally present in the United States.

“Several cities have passed ordinances or issued executive orders forbidding local law enforcement to even ask the question as to whether a person is in the United States lawfully,” Mr. Coleman said.

In adopting such “gag orders,” Mr. Coleman said, cities prevent their own employees from finding and arresting illegal immigrants who may go on to commit violent crimes.

Senator Ken Salazar, Democrat of Colorado, denounced the proposal, saying it would force schoolteachers and hospital emergency room workers to become “the cops of our immigration laws.”

Mr. Kennedy said Mr. Coleman’s amendment would deter immigrants from reporting crimes or cooperating with public health authorities

Illegal immigrants who seek medical care could expose themselves to deportation, Mr. Kennedy said, so they will be reluctant to “come forward for programs essential to public health and safety.” For example, he said, immigrants with tuberculosis might be reluctant to seek treatment, and they could infect United States citizens.