

Bipartisan House immigration group weighs when to unveil plan

By Russell Berman - 07/17/13 05:00 AM ET

A bipartisan House group is now wrestling with the critical question of when and how to release its comprehensive immigration proposal, which members say they have nearly completed.

After more than four years of secretive talks, the seven remaining members of the group do not want to put out their 500-page proposal only to see it immediately swatted down by conservatives who want an opportunity to first vote on measures strengthening border security.

“It’s clear the House Republicans aren’t ready for a bipartisan approach yet,” said a Democratic aide familiar with the group’s deliberations.

Negotiators want to frame their bill as a viable middle ground between a more left-leaning Senate bill and partisan proposals on border security and enforcement.

But to do that, they need to make a positive first impression with House Republicans who have gravitated toward the piecemeal, enforcement-first immigration strategy outlined by the party leadership.

The bipartisan House bill includes a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants, Rep. Xavier Becerra (D-Calif.) confirmed in a Spanish-language interview last week, although Republicans in the group might characterize the provision as a pathway to legal status. The path is at least two years longer and more arduous than the one in the Senate-passed plan, which negotiators hope will make it more palatable to conservatives.

While members of the group expect some liberal members of the Democratic Caucus to oppose the bill, it has already won praise from House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), and Democratic votes are likely to be easier to attain. Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) has encouraged the group’s work, but has not weighed in on the substance of its proposal.

Whenever the group does release its plan, it will look for an endorsement from Wisconsin Rep. Paul Ryan, the Republican budget chief who has kept in close contact with negotiators and has supported the effort in public and in private.

There are two schools of thought on when to release the bill, according to aides familiar with the discussions. The first is to put the bill out before the August recess, allowing lawmakers to hold it up as a compromise and a tangible alternative in forums with constituents in their districts. But others in the group want to wait until after the month-long recess, citing concerns that without a coordinated push, the bill would simply become a bull’s-eye for opponents of reform.

“If they put it out now, does it just become a target without a lot of defenders? Does it languish?” a second aide said, describing the questions that negotiators are mulling.

While the delay in finishing the bill had earlier threatened to render the group irrelevant, the House GOP leadership’s decision to put off most major immigration action until the fall has given negotiators a new window of opportunity.

The group met for several hours last week to pore over the legislative text and resolve disputes over the wording of some provisions, lawmakers and aides said. While they didn’t finish the bill, they came close.

Negotiators have proclaimed the bill as being “close” to done for months, only to stall over healthcare and other sticking points, which has led many observers to adopt a “we’ll believe it when we see it” attitude to new reports of progress.

But with House Republican leaders still in search of a viable way forward on immigration, the bipartisan group might yet have a role to play. A conference-wide meeting last week yielded little consensus amid deep divisions over how far the GOP should go on the issue.

Five individual immigration bills have passed out of the Judiciary and Homeland Security committees, but the GOP leadership has yet to bring any of them to the floor for a vote.

Democrats opposed to the Judiciary Committee bills are skeptical they could pass the House without their support; some conservative opponents of an immigration overhaul have said they would seek to block the passage of any legislation that could lead to a House-Senate conference committee.

After last week’s House GOP meeting, the party leadership issued a statement recommitting to a “step-by-step” approach to immigration reform, in contrast to the Senate’s comprehensive bill. That stance suggests that the bipartisan group’s proposal would be split into pieces.

Democrats have criticized a piecemeal approach, but some in the group have said they are open to breaking up the legislation if holding separate votes will help win it passage on the House floor.

“The most important thing is the outcome, not the process,” one aide said.

Meanwhile, Democrats and immigration reform advocates are weighing strategies for keeping pressure on House Republicans during the August recess. One member of the bipartisan group, Rep. Luis Gutiérrez (D-Ill.), has already begun holding events across the country to build support for an overhaul, including appearances this month in Oregon, Washington state and Florida.

In addition to Becerra and Gutiérrez, the other members of the group are Democratic Reps. Zoe Lofgren (Calif.) and John Yarmuth (Ky.) and Republican Reps. Mario Diaz-Balart (Fla.), John Carter (Texas) and Sam Johnson (Texas).

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