

Bipartisan immigration reform bill is expected this week

By [David Nakamura](#) and [Paul Kane](#), Published: April 9

A bipartisan Senate group is likely to announce a proposal to overhaul the nation's immigration system in the next several days, and a committee hearing could be held on the legislation as early as next week, people familiar with the negotiations said Tuesday.

Members of the group said they are close to finalizing an agreement on the comprehensive proposal that is expected to include a path to citizenship for 11 million illegal immigrants and could serve as the template for a deal between Congress and the White House.

Seven group members spoke with Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, who agreed to schedule a hearing on the bill after it is introduced, those involved in the discussions said. Several weeks of debate during which senators could offer amendments are likely to begin in early May, said the individuals, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss private deliberations.

"We don't have that many issues" remaining to be negotiated, said Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), a member of the working group. "Now is the time to get it done."

Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), who has expressed caution in public about the pace of the negotiations, was expected to brief Senate Republicans on Tuesday, but he was unable to attend the weekly lunch, aides said. He is scheduled to discuss the immigration bill with GOP colleagues Wednesday.

Rubio, too, is said to be pleased with Leahy's decision to have a committee hearing and offer time for debate, aides said.

"Senator Rubio has said from the outset that we will not rush this process, and that begins at the committee level," said Alex Conant, Rubio's spokesman. "The Judiciary Committee must have plenty of time to debate and improve the bipartisan group's proposal. . . . Senator Rubio will be requesting that his Senate colleagues arrange multiple public hearings on the immigration bill. We believe that the more public scrutiny this legislation receives, the better it will become."

Greater scrutiny could also lead to problems with the proposal. Despite progress by the bipartisan Senate group, lawmakers in both parties have expressed concerns about efforts to overhaul the immigration system.

Many Republicans, in particular, are unwilling to back any measure that would put illegal immigrants on a path to citizenship. Some have expressed openness to some form of legalization that stops short of a citizenship plan, but such a compromise would draw opposition from many Democrats and immigrant advocates.

Senate aides were continuing to draft legislation in hopes that a final agreement could be reached among the eight members of the working group as soon as Thursday or Friday. Aides cautioned, however, that the final agreement could be delayed until next week to be sure that all the senators have signed off on each provision.

In addition to a path to citizenship, the bill is expected to offer new visa programs for low-skilled and highly skilled workers and farmworkers, increased border control and workplace security measures, and the elimination of some categories of family visas.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) told reporters that she had reached a “tentative agreement” with negotiators on a dispute between farmworkers and growers on how to handle the massive numbers of illegal immigrants employed by farms. She declined to explain the details but said it is considered the last key policy dispute in the immigration talks, declaring that “the train is leaving the station.”

McCain said Rubio, who is considered crucial to the success of a bipartisan deal, does not object to having the group move forward, but he wants to make sure that the hearing and legislative process are open and transparent: “He’s talking about time to have amendments, to have input, to have hearings. He’s talking about that, he’s not talking about not getting an agreement. He’s been very helpful and very constructive in this whole effort.”

President Obama, who has made immigration his top second-term priority, has expressed support for the Senate effort, but he has said he will step in with his own proposals if the group does not come to an agreement soon. Obama won more than 70 percent support from Latino and Asian American voters last fall.

Advocates have become increasingly frustrated about the pace of talks, and thousands are expected to attend an immigration rally Wednesday afternoon outside the Capitol.

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