

Fleeting hopes for immigration reform

Fearing that time is running out, advocates from the right and left are pressuring House Republicans to end opposition

By Dan Nowicki and Erin Kelly The Republic | azcentral.com Wed Oct 30, 2013 1:10 PM

Lawmakers have come under an unprecedented wave of lobbying from immigration-reform supporters on the right and left in recent days, keeping hopes for the legislation alive in the Republican-controlled House of Representatives.

A small legion of pro-reform business, religious and law-enforcement leaders have converged on Capitol Hill this week to press lawmakers for action, and a comprehensive Democratic bill won its first GOP supporters.

At the same time, immigrant advocates also are visiting congressional offices and holding prayer vigils outside lawmakers' residences, as happened last week at the Peoria home of U.S. Rep. Trent Franks, R-Ariz.

The developments come as time runs short on supporters' goal of action on immigration reform before the end of the year. The prognosis for bipartisan cooperation is grim if work on the issue slides into 2014, a congressional midterm-election year.

Reform supporters are keeping their optimism in check. Feelings in Washington are still raw following the standoff between House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, and his House GOP caucus and President Barack Obama over the federal government shutdown and debt ceiling. And many Republicans are not in the mood to hand the president a victory on the top domestic priority of his second term.

A number of hard-line House Republicans, estimated at 20 to 40 members of Boehner's GOP conference, have made it clear that they have no interest in voting for what they consider to be "amnesty" for undocumented immigrants.

However, reform backers point to encouraging signs in addition to the intense push by the business lobby.

Key House Republicans, including Reps. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, Mario Diaz-Balart of Florida and Darrell Issa of California, reportedly are working on proposals to address the status of the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants who already have settled in the United States, which is the central issue for Democrats and immigration activists.

The Democrat-controlled Senate on June 27 passed a sweeping reform bill that included a 13-year pathway to citizenship for immigrants who pass background checks, pay assessed taxes and fines and take other steps to get right with the law, as well as a massive investment in border security.

There are indications that some Republicans are becoming impatient with the House inaction on piecemeal bills that have been talked about since the Senate bill passed. Two House Republicans — Reps. Jeff Denham of California and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida — have become the first two GOP lawmakers to sign onto a comprehensive immigration bill offered by House Democrats.

Rep. Joe Heck, R-Nev., last week said in a written statement that the growing possibility that the House might punt on immigration reform in 2013 reflects “the leadership vacuum in Washington that rightly has so many people frustrated with this dysfunctional Congress.”

Sen. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., a former 12-year House member who helped negotiate the Senate bill, said Monday on Twitter that momentum appears to be building in the House. “That’s good news for Arizona, and the country,” he said in the message.

For their part, Boehner and his fellow House Republican leaders have not yet publicly declared immigration reform dead, which even the most pessimistic reform supporters say means there is still a chance the House could act in November or early December.

House committees so far have approved five bills, including legislation to strengthen border security and require employers to use a federal database to ensure they are hiring people who are legally eligible to work in the United States.

“The speaker said last week, ‘I still think immigration reform is an important subject that needs to be addressed. And I’m hopeful,’ ” Boehner spokesman Michael Steel told *The Arizona Republic* on Tuesday via e-mail. “He added that he supports a step-by-step immigration process.”

Businesses speak out

Hoping to make sure immigration reform gets on the House’s 2013 agenda, more than 600 business, law-enforcement, religious and political leaders from Arizona and nearly 40 other states flooded Capitol Hill on Tuesday. The fly-in was organized by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and other groups, including FWD.us, which was founded by leaders of high-tech companies.

The activists, mostly self-described conservatives, met with more than 100 members of Congress to urge them to take action on broad legislation that includes a way for most undocumented immigrants in the U.S. to earn citizenship.

“In every corner of the Capitol, the energy these farmers, tech leaders, police chiefs and pastors brought to the Hill was palpable,” said Ali Noorani, executive director of the National Immigration Forum. “They brought a new perspective to the debate, one informed by what they see every day in their local businesses, churches and police stations — a broken system that has a negative impact on local communities nationwide.”

Peoria Vice Mayor Tony Rivero is a conservative Republican who urged Arizona's GOP congressmen to support reform this year. His city needs more farmworkers who are legally authorized to work, and it needs its undocumented residents to come out of the shadows, he said.

"My message to our congressional delegation is that, as a constituent and a conservative Republican, I support a solution to this problem," Rivero said. "We need to secure the border, identify the people who are here illegally and put them on a path to legality and put enforcement measures in place to make sure we aren't here again in 10 years."

Former Phoenix Police Chief Jack Harris said he told members of Arizona's congressional delegation that the current immigration system makes police officers' jobs more complicated.

"Every community is trying to solve the problem in a different way," he said. "In some places, you (an undocumented immigrant) can get a driver's license. In some places, you can't. Some places are very liberal and report almost no crimes (committed by undocumented immigrants). Others deport you for just minor infractions. There's great confusion among the law-enforcement community about what the rules are and what their authority is."

'I do care about them'

The conservative lobbying efforts are in conjunction with efforts from more liberal immigration-advocacy groups.

Last week, a contingent of 44 undocumented immigrants and their supporters traveled from Phoenix by bus to Washington, D.C., and Ohio in hope of meeting with Boehner to persuade him to schedule a vote on a bill that includes a pathway to citizenship. The group, which included many "dreamers," or undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children, never got the opportunity to talk with Boehner.

However, the immigration activists from the advocacy group Promise Arizona who camped outside Franks' house did get the chance to talk with the representative for more than 25 minutes.

They initially were buoyed by his response, which they interpreted as support for a pathway to citizenship. However, Franks later clarified to *The Republic* that he would not support a special pathway to citizenship. Franks said he would support legalizing undocumented immigrants under certain conditions but would not allow them to subsequently seek citizenship. Or the undocumented immigrants could return to their home countries and apply for green cards and citizenship that way, he said.

Franks said he didn't fully articulate his position to the activists because he felt compassion for their pleas. "Sometimes, in any situation, you don't hit people in the face with the worst of it," Franks said. "I wanted them to know, while maybe we didn't agree on everything, there were some things we do agree on. I do care about them."

Proponents are positive

Glenn Hamer, president and CEO of the Arizona Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said the group of Arizonans that flew in as part of the U.S. Chamber-led D.C. visit were going to meet with all nine House members from Arizona. After morning meetings with Republican Reps. Paul Gosar, Matt Salmon and David Schweikert, Hamer said the sessions were positive.

“There is complete agreement that we have a busted immigration system,” he said. “It’s fair to say that there is an understanding that we need immigration reform. It’s very clear that the House is going to pass its vision for immigration reform. If it’s simply the Senate bill or bust, then nothing will happen.”

Flake said he believes the methodical and strategic lobbying by the business community, faith groups and activist organizations will help motivate the House. He said he is OK with House Republicans taking a step-by-step strategy rather than passing a comprehensive bill like the one he helped craft in the Senate.

“My position is, if you can move it piecemeal or sequentially, that’s fine,” Flake said. “If you have to go comprehensive, that’s fine. Let’s get something to the president’s desk.”

Frank Sharry, executive director of the pro-reform organization America’s Voice, said the two House Republicans who signed on to the alternative Democratic bill also are examples of momentum.

“When that bill was first introduced, it was widely panned as a Democratic ‘message bill’ that was going nowhere and was setting up the blame game in a run toward 2014,” Sharry said. “But because Democrats made the smart move of making sure every policy in the bill was passed with bipartisan support either in the Senate or the House, it has become a serious offering and a place where Republicans can go. I think you will see more Republicans getting on board.”

Because of Boehner’s leadership style and uneasy relationship with many of his rank-and-file members, Sharry said, it may take “a convergence and emergence of a critical mass of Republicans to convince leadership to go forward.”

Hamer said he believes there is still a possibility for compromise between the House and Senate.

“I don’t want to be too Pollyannaish,” he said. “Passing immigration reform is not like renaming a post office. It’s going to be tough.”

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