

GOP Puts Focus on Securing Borders

By Sara Murray

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Republican lawmakers sought Thursday to beef up the Senate immigration bill's provisions for tightening border security, an effort that could prove vital to drawing broader bipartisan support in Congress.

The Senate Judiciary Committee kicked off its first day of debate Thursday on the immigration bill, which was drafted by a bipartisan group of eight senators. Faced with at least 300 amendments, the panel started with the bill's border-security measures, an area that has drawn acute GOP criticism and tested the group of eight's alliance early in the process.

The topic is especially sensitive because the legislation mandates certain border-security measures must be in place before any illegal immigrant now in the U.S. can be granted permanent legal status. Determining how to measure border security and what metrics must be met before illegal immigrants in the country can gain legal status—known as triggers—have been a matter of debate.

"If you pass this legislation, the amnesty is on track, the triggers don't work," said Alabama Sen. Jeff Sessions, a Republican opposed to the legislation. "The American people need to understand, this is how we get taken to the cleaners."

To increase the bill's bipartisan appeal, members of the Democratic-controlled judiciary panel voted Thursday to adopt a handful of GOP-sponsored amendments.

One of the approved changes, introduced by Sen. Charles Grassley (R., Iowa), would require officials to maintain 100% surveillance and a 90% effectiveness rate for the entire U.S.-Mexico border. The effectiveness rate measures the number of illegal border-crossers who are apprehended or turned back compared with the total number of illegal crossings. The bill originally called for that effectiveness rate to apply only to certain high-risk areas along the border.

"It's important to shore up support with some persuadable" GOP lawmakers, said Alfonso Aguilar, executive director of the Latino Partnership for Conservative Principles and former immigration official in the George W. Bush administration, who supports the legislation. The GOP base's main concern is border security, he said.

Members of the group of eight—half of whom sit on the Judiciary Committee—toe a fine line in adjusting the bill. They want to remain amenable to changes in order to win support from other lawmakers, but they also have to closely guard provisions at the bill's center that were crafted during sensitive and time-consuming negotiations between senators and outside groups representing employers, labor and other interests.

Members of the gang of eight came prepared to make some changes to toughen security measures and to hold the line against others they felt were excessive.

Mr. Grassley, who introduced 77 amendments, some of which were designed to strengthen security, said the legislation amounted to legalization first with the promise of border security later.

"The triggers in the bill that kick off legalization are weak," Mr. Grassley said, referring to the process of providing permanent legal status to illegal immigrants.

He didn't get everything he wanted. One of his amendments would have prevented the 11 million illegal immigrants in the U.S. from gaining interim legal status until the border was effectively secure for six months. The legislation as written says that interim legal status can be granted once the secretary of Homeland Security submits a plan to secure the border, which is required within 180 days of the bill becoming law.

The amendment failed in a 6-to-12 vote. All four members of the bipartisan group of eight voted against it.

Sen. Charles Schumer (D., N.Y.), who helped write the legislation, said the eight senators plan to meet before each committee session to discuss proposed changes—"which ones are deal-breakers and which aren't," he said.

The committee approved a series of other changes Thursday, including a ban on fees for people who cross the border at land ports and more protections for children who are in the custody of border-control officials.

The bipartisan group's biggest test may come if committee Chairman Sen. Patrick Leahy (D., Vt.) offers an amendment, already filed, allowing Americans to sponsor same-sex partners for green cards. Some Democrats may feel bound to support it, but the measure could drive away Republican support.

"This one is something...I worry about all the time," Mr. Schumer said Thursday, noting the four Republican members of the group of eight have said they wouldn't support the bill if the measure was included. "How we resolve this remains to be seen," he said.

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