

House GOP Puts Immigration on Back Burner

By Laura Meckler
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Prospects for an immigration overhaul have dimmed over the summer congressional recess, as a newly crowded agenda damps what already was tepid interest among House leaders in taking up the issue.

House Speaker John Boehner (R., Ohio) said in July he hoped the House would consider immigration bills before turning to negotiations on raising the nation's debt ceiling this fall. But as the House prepares to reconvene next week, GOP leaders have no plans to bring immigration bills to the floor, aides say.

President Barack Obama, meanwhile, has placed a major, new issue on the agenda by asking Congress to authorize military strikes in Syria. A debate over federal spending levels for the next fiscal year is likely to dominate much of September and the weeks beyond.

In a sign of diminished expectations, the House Judiciary Committee chairman said there is nothing wrong with having a debate that doesn't end with an immigration bill being signed into law.

"We pass bills all the time that don't get passed all the way through and signed into law, because we want to spell out to the American people what we think the right solutions to our problems are," the chairman, Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R., Va.), said in an interview. "I don't believe immigration reform should be any different than that."

At the same time, Mr. Boehner faces considerable pressure from business groups, evangelicals, law enforcement and some GOP donors for action on immigration legislation.

House leaders will check in with lawmakers returning to Washington next week to see if there is a groundswell for action. But absent an unexpected reversal, advocates of an overhaul are predicting action may have to wait until 2014.

House leaders have said they won't consider the broad, bipartisan immigration bill passed by the Senate in June. That bill included enhanced border security, provisions for tougher enforcement of immigration law, a guest-worker program and a path to citizenship for many of the 11 million people in the U.S. illegally. Mr. Boehner has said these issues would be addressed in pieces. But Mr. Goodlatte said it is "too soon" to say what legislation the House will consider, or what the strategy for passing it may be. He rejected any "artificial deadline" for action.

His committee has passed four immigration bills without Democratic support. But those measures likely would need Democratic votes to clear the full House, given the reluctance among some Republicans to advance any bill for fear that it would lead to compromises with the

Senate. A border-security bill that cleared the Homeland Security Committee unanimously may have chance at passage, but leadership aides say there are no plans yet to take up that bill.

Republicans are also talking about legislation to give legal status to people brought to the U.S. as children, but they have yet to lay out details.

Meanwhile, Democrats working on a bipartisan House bill say it is completed and that they are waiting for Republicans to agree to release it. But a Republican in the group, Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart of Florida, disagreed, saying his conversations with fellow Republicans have convinced him that further changes are needed.

Among their worries, he said, are that a pathway to citizenship will open for illegal immigrants that isn't available to those who used existing legal channels. He also wants to ensure that Mr. Obama would enforce the bill's provisions, which many Republicans doubt he would. "We need to tweak the bill to address these points," he said.

"I was hopeful we would be in a better place today," Rep. Luis Gutierrez (D., Ill.), another member of the group, told reporters last week.

During the August congressional recess, advocates for a broad overhaul of immigration laws that would legalize many illegal immigrants held rallies and meetings with GOP lawmakers in hopes of persuading them that political support for an overhaul was strong in their districts.

About two dozen House Republicans have said publicly they are open to a path to citizenship for those now here illegally, with other Republicans favoring legal status for this group. There also were few high-profile events opposing an overhaul of the sort that killed a similar immigration push in 2006 and 2007.

"The pressure is working," argued Frank Sharry, executive director of America's Voice, a pro-immigration advocacy group. "Our question is, when are we going to have a week of votes on immigration?"

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