

House immigration group announces 'agreement in principle'

By Russell Berman - 05/16/13 06:19 PM ET

A bipartisan group of House negotiators said Thursday it has reached an “agreement in principle” on comprehensive immigration reform legislation.

“We have an agreement in principle,” Rep. John Carter (R-Tex.) said as he and five other members of the group emerged from a two-hour meeting late Thursday afternoon.

Democrats confirmed the deal, and lawmakers said they would meet again next week to put the finishing touches on the legislative text.

“The big hurdles are taken care of, so now it’s an issue of finalizing the draft,” Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart (R-Fla.) said.

The agreement represents a major development for one of President Obama’s top second term priorities. The group of eight lawmakers has met in secret for more than four years to craft a broad immigration proposal, but they had stumbled in recent weeks over a guest worker program and the treatment of immigrants under the 2010 healthcare law.

With a bipartisan bill moving ahead in the Senate, the House negotiators had faced pressure from Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) to complete its proposal to allow the House to put its stamp on the immigration debate. Earlier Thursday, Boehner had said he was “concerned” about the group’s inability to strike a deal.

The House bill is expected to be more conservative than the Senate proposal, owing in large part to the fact that Republicans control the lower chamber. People briefed on the negotiations have said the path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants in the House proposal would be at least two years longer than the minimum of 13 for most immigrants in the Senate bill.

None of the House negotiators would discuss the details of their proposal Thursday.

“There are going to be a lot of differences in a lot of areas” from the Senate bill, Diaz-Balart said.

Carter had said he hoped to formally introduce legislation by the first week of June, before the Senate is able to pass the bipartisan “Gang of Eight” bill that is now moving through committee.

The lawmakers appeared relieved but tired as they left their meeting Thursday, and they acknowledged the challenge they would have in pushing their legislation through a chamber dominated by conservatives.

“We’ve been able to keep our senses of humor, but it’s been an arduous process,” Diaz-Balart said. “And we haven’t fallen apart yet.”

Reaching an agreement, Diaz-Balart said, was “a huge step.”

“But it’s the first step of a difficult process,” he added.

The legislation will likely have to make it through the conservative House Judiciary Committee before it reaches the floor, and lawmakers said there was no timetable for a final vote.

The negotiations appeared to be near a breaking point on Wednesday after Carter said he would attend one final meeting on Thursday. If a deal was not struck then, he warned, he would go his own way and introduce legislation without Democratic support.

Despite the drama, Democratic Rep. John Yarmuth (Ky.) said Thursday’s meeting was not tense.

“We’ve had people pound the desk, but we’ve never had a tense meeting,” he said.

The other members of the House group include Democratic Reps. Luis Gutierrez (Ill.), Zoe Lofgren (Calif.) and Xavier Becerra (Calif.). The other Republicans are Reps. Raul Labrador (Idaho), who participated in Thursday’s meeting by phone, and Sam Johnson (Tex.), who did not participate because he was in the hospital recovering from hernia surgery.

Earlier Thursday, Carter said the negotiators had narrowed their differences ahead of the climactic meeting to discuss the last remaining sticking point: healthcare.

“After the last conversation I just had on the floor, I feel like we’ve got some momentum going forward to get our bill on the floor before the Senate bill gets over here,” Carter said after talking with two Democrats he would not name. He clarified that a floor vote would not come until after it goes through the House Judiciary Committee.

His comments were considerably more optimistic than his remarks on Wednesday, when Labrador suggested negotiators had reached an impasse.

Republicans in the group are feeling a time crunch because of the increasing possibility that the Senate will pass its bipartisan bill sometime in June, putting considerable pressure on the House. “The Senate bill is a nonstarter in the House,” Carter said.

Boehner had privately urged Republicans to get their proposal out in the next several weeks, aides said. “I am concerned that the bipartisan group has been unable to wrap up their work,” Boehner said earlier Thursday at a Capitol news conference. “I know that there are a couple issues that have come up, and I continue to believe that the House needs to deal with this, and the House needs to work its will.”

The bipartisan coalition had stalled in recent weeks over healthcare and the guest worker program.

Democrats have said they are bound by a guest-worker agreement struck by business and labor groups that formed the basis for language in the bipartisan "Gang of Eight" bill in the Senate. House Republicans have balked at the visa caps in that deal, and Carter said before Thursday's meeting that the group had essentially agreed to postpone a fight over the guest worker program until the legislation reaches the House Judiciary Committee or the floor.

"We're basically going to leave it open," Carter said. "They're going to offer that. We're going to offer what we would prefer to have and not be bound by that agreement. It will be determined either in committee or on the floor."

Democrats have already agreed that immigrants with provisional legal status should not be eligible for benefits under the healthcare law, but Republicans want to put in place requirements that immigrants provide their own insurance and are not a burden to federal, state or local governments.

"We're trying to make this as non-taxpayer funded as possible, on any level, including local," Carter said.

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