

House Republicans Preparing Plan for Immigration Overhaul

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WASHINGTON — The House speaker, John A. Boehner, and his Republican leadership team are preparing to release their principles for an overhaul of the nation's immigration laws later this month, the speaker told his members at a closed-door conference on Wednesday.

Though the “standards or principles document,” as Mr. Boehner of Ohio referred to the white paper in the meeting, has long been in the works, its imminent release reflects a broader push within the Republican conference to put forth its own proposals as a counterpoint to legislation in the Democratic-controlled Senate.

House Republicans hope to release their principles near the end of the month before President Obama's State of the Union address, as well as before their annual retreat. Republican aides had previously said that their leadership team was unlikely to make any strategic decisions on immigration before the retreat.

In June, the Senate passed a broad overhaul of the nation's immigration laws — including a path to citizenship for the 11 million immigrants already in the country illegally — with bipartisan support. But the legislation has faced more hurdles in the Republican-controlled House, where some lawmakers are opposed to any form of legalization, which they call amnesty. House Republicans instead prefer a piecemeal approach, with several smaller bills instead of one large one.

In Wednesday's meeting, Mr. Boehner assured his leadership team that he was not planning to enter into conference negotiations with the Senate using the upper chamber's broad bill as a framework.

“Speaker Boehner has consistently been clear for some time now that he supports step-by-step, common-sense reforms to fix our broken immigration system,” said Michael Steel, a Boehner spokesman.

Rebecca Tallent, a longtime immigration adviser to Senator John McCain of Arizona whom Mr. Boehner recently hired, has been spearheading the effort out of the speaker's office, working with other key Republican lawmakers: Representative Eric Cantor of Virginia, the House majority leader; Representative Mario Diaz-Balart of Florida, who has been pushing for a broad immigration overhaul; Representative Bob W. Goodlatte of Virginia, the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee; and Representative Paul D. Ryan of Wisconsin, his party's 2012 vice-presidential nominee and chairman of the House Budget Committee.

The goal of the principles is to gauge the Republican conference's willingness to tackle immigration this year, as well as to receive feedback from lawmakers before embarking on a legislative strategy.

Immigration advocates and Democrats will be watching closely to see how strict the border security and enforcement language is, as well as if the guidelines include any mention of a path to legalization. Some House Republicans, including Mr. Cantor and Mr. Goodlatte, have shown a willingness to offer legalization that could lead to citizenship for the so-called Dreamers — those young adults who were brought to the country illegally as children.

“Things continue to look better and better for immigration reform, and we hope to work with Republicans to get something real done,” said Senator Charles E. Schumer, Democrat of New York and one of the architects of the Senate's immigration bill.

House Republicans who have long been pushing for broad immigration overhaul are also hopeful that the document will cover all areas of immigration said an aide who has been working on the issue.

Mr. Boehner's announcement comes as congressional Republicans grapple with how to handle the specter of a broad immigration overhaul this year. Although many top Republicans believe that the party needs to pass some form of immigration legislation before the 2016 presidential elections, the party's rank-and-file members are reluctant to tackle the issue — which is opposed by many in the conservative base — in the run-up to the midterm elections.

But they are facing increasing pressure from outside groups. In his annual address on Wednesday, Thomas J. Donohue, the president and chief executive of the United States Chamber of Commerce, said that the Chamber will “pull out all the stops,” working with unions, faith-based organizations and law enforcement groups to urge House Republicans to act on the Senate-passed bill.

“Now the pundits will tell you that it'll be very, very hard to accomplish much of anything this year, after all, don't you remember, it's an election year,” he said. “We hope to turn that assumption on its ear by turning the upcoming elections into a motivation for change. It's based on a simple theory: If you can't make them see the light then at least make them feel the heat.”

Mr. Donohue called immigration reform an important part of expanding jobs and careers in the 21st century. “Why? Because throughout history immigrants have brought innovation, ideas and investments to American enterprise, and in terms of demographics, we need immigration,” he said.

Mr. Donohue also pointed out that, while politically difficult, an immigration overhaul seems to be one area where the largely stalled 113th Congress might actually be able to reach some form of compromise and pass legislation.

“I think Democrats and Republicans alike would like to go home and run for office with something they got done that’s significant,” he said. “I believe we’re two thirds of the way there.”

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