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Immigration Hearings Set to Open in the House

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WASHINGTON — The chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, Representative Robert W. Goodlatte of Virginia, said on Monday that a series of hearings he will schedule in the coming months would examine different pieces of a possible overhaul of the [immigration](#) system, including proposals for a pathway to citizenship for 11 million illegal immigrants in the country.

On Tuesday the committee will hold the first of those hearings, formally opening what Mr. Goodlatte, a Republican, called a “momentous debate on immigration” in Congress. While attention has been focused on the immigration proposals unveiled last week by President Obama and a bipartisan group of senators, Mr. Goodlatte is moving quickly to stake out a position for the Republican-controlled House on the issue. In an interview, Mr. Goodlatte said he expected that the hearings would result in one or more bills that reflect the House position on the overhaul.

Mr. Goodlatte, 60, has established a solid record of opposition to any measures he regarded as amnesty for illegal immigrants. But he said the Judiciary hearings would include scrutiny of proposals to offer legal status to most of the immigrants living illegally in the country.

Calling legalization of those immigrants “the most difficult side” of the immigration issue, Mr. Goodlatte said the committee would consider options to give “some kind of legal status to bring people out of the shadows,” offering them a chance at “being a fuller part of our society.” He said the committee would examine proposals that would allow most of the 11 million illegal immigrants to become citizens relatively quickly, as well as plans that would only offer limited legal status to far fewer people.

“We don’t want to prejudge anything,” he said.

Mr. Goodlatte’s plans for the hearings were a new sign of how far the center of gravity on immigration has shifted since the November elections, when Mr. Obama’s support for a pathway to citizenship for illegal immigrants helped secure his re-election. Many Republican leaders have been calling for the party to find a new approach that plays down strident rhetoric against illegal immigrants and instead offers solutions to Latinos, high-tech businesses, farmers and many other groups frustrated with the system’s failures.

Mr. Goodlatte’s game plan for the hearings contrasts with his predecessor as House judiciary chairman, Lamar Smith, Republican of Texas. Mr. Smith, who, like Mr. Goodlatte, has special expertise on immigration issues, has been resolutely opposed to most measures offering illegal immigrants a path to citizenship. Hearings held by Mr. Smith often focused on what he saw as serious and sometimes dangerous lapses in the Obama administration’s enforcement of immigration laws.

Mr. Goodlatte, who practiced immigration law for a number of years before he was elected to Congress in 1992, said the hearings would educate House lawmakers on the complexities of the issue, and air thorny subjects so that they could find out what voters at home are thinking. Even though the mood in Washington has changed since November, resistance to those measures remains strong in many conservative Republican districts.

Mr. Goodlatte said that assessing the status of the Obama administration's enforcement efforts would be a critical part of the hearings, which will be held in the full committee and in a subcommittee led by Representative Trey Gowdy of South Carolina, also a Republican conservative.

Referring to an amnesty in 1986, which was followed by a renewed wave of illegal immigration, Mr. Goodlatte said, "What assurances will we have that the federal government is going to enforce the law this time?"

A bipartisan group of House lawmakers has also been meeting, but they have made few public comments about their proposals. Those lawmakers and immigration advocates on both sides of the debate are looking to Tuesday's hearing as an early glimpse of how an immigration overhaul could play out in the House. The tone the members take in their questioning — particularly the Republicans — will likely offer a sense of where they stand on the issue going forward. Proponents of an overhaul are watching Mr. Goodlatte with cautious optimism, viewing him as less of a hard-liner than Mr. Smith.

Similarly, the witness list posted on the committee's Web site has come under intense scrutiny, as much for who is listed as who is not. The emphasis now, advocates said, seems to be on high-skilled workers and enforcement, two themes popular with Republicans. The list also includes Julian Castro, the mayor of San Antonio, a Democrat who had a star turn at his party's national convention last summer.

White House officials said Mr. Obama would press the issue this week, meeting on Tuesday with immigrant advocates, labor leaders and business leaders from industries that have been clamoring for easier access to foreign workers.

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