

Immigration reform backers see hopeful signs in House

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PHOENIX -- Despite the missed goals, uncertain timetable and at-times heated rhetoric in the Republican-led House of Representatives, immigration-reform supporters remain cautiously optimistic that a game plan is emerging that will have lawmakers voting on the legislation this year.

Action in the House is on hold until after Congress returns from its August recess on Sept. 9. But the five-week break, during which representatives will hold town hall meetings and otherwise gauge the feelings of their constituents, could go a long way toward determining the legislation's fate.

Immigration-rights activists this month are planning to press their case with House lawmakers. Business, religious, law-enforcement and labor groups already have been lobbying aggressively for reform. Opponents of immigration reform — which many critics call "amnesty" for law-breaking immigrants — also are expected to make their voices heard, but the House's inaction so far has provided little to galvanize them.

The break comes as other developments offer renewed hope for supporters of immigration reform.

While House Republican leaders flatly rejected the comprehensive immigration package that the Senate passed June 27, making it seem as though immigration reform was destined to die a slow death, it appears likely that votes on a series of bills are possible in October and that a conference committee with the Senate could be completed in December or early next year, before midterm election-year politics paralyze Capitol Hill.

Reform advocates say they detect a sincere effort by Republican leaders such as House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, and Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., to come up with solutions for the most vexing problems associated with the nation's broken border system, including addressing the status of the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants who have already settled in the country.

At a town hall meeting last month in Racine, Wis., Ryan, the 2012 Republican vice presidential nominee and a possible 2016 White House hopeful, told the audience that the group of House immigration bills would include one "to legalize people who are undocumented," the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* reported.

Hoping to avoid the broad pathway to citizenship included in the Senate-passed plan, many House Republicans are more open to legislation without a special path for most undocumented immigrants. They are more inclined to limit citizenship to young undocumented immigrants, known as "dreamers," and leave the majority of the 11 million who have no legal status without a certain path to citizenship. The idea would allow many to work toward citizenship through existing channels, such as having their children or employers sponsor them, which would be more difficult than allowing them to apply for citizenship on their own after they received permanent residency.

While many reform backers disagree with that concept, they say it at least would provide a starting point for House and Senate negotiations on bringing undocumented immigrants out of the shadows.

Even controversial remarks, such as those made by Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa — who caused a furor recently by comparing dreamers with drug runners — might wind up helping the reform movement by reminding Republicans of the political damage that immigration hard-liners can do the GOP brand among Latino voters.

Boehner called King's comments "deeply offensive and wrong" and contrary to the values of the American people and the Republican Party.

Since President Barack Obama's 2012 defeat of Republican Mitt Romney, many Republican leaders have said that the GOP needs to make rebuilding its relationship with Latino voters a priority.

"My sense is ... that momentum is growing," said Rep. Xavier Becerra, D-Calif., who is part of a bipartisan House group that for months has been working on a comprehensive immigration-reform bill. "Even, to some degree, you're beginning to hear House Republicans change their tune. It's still got a lot of sour notes in it, but at least they are now singing a tune that is talking about possibly getting this done. But it is decision time. We are watching the clock run out."

Frustrations mount

So far, the House immigration push mostly has been a series of disappointments for supporters.

Becerra's group has yet to produce a bill, and on a recent media conference call, he acknowledged that it has taken longer than expected.

"Many of us would have preferred to have done this before the August recess," he said.

Others similarly had hoped that the House would pass at least one immigration-related bill — border-security legislation was seen as the likeliest candidate — before the break, but that didn't happen, either.

Boehner's criticism of the Senate bill, which passed on a 68-32 vote, and insistence that any House immigration legislation have the support of a majority of Republicans, also has complicated matters.

August could prove pivotal. Reform supporters and immigration-rights activists aim to keep up the drumbeat for a pathway to citizenship and let Congress members know that they are not giving up.

"The August recess is very important because ... we're trying to make it clear to our Republican colleagues, including those in Arizona, that we'd like for them to pass the legislation that they think is best," said Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., the lead GOP negotiator on the Senate bill. "Then, we would look forward to a conference and trying to meet the concerns of both sides and come up with legislation. I believe we all share the conclusion that the status quo is unacceptable."

Promise Arizona, a pro-reform organization founded in opposition to the controversial 2010 state immigration law known as Senate Bill 1070, and a coalition of 22 other groups this month plan to step up the pressure on Republican members of Arizona's House delegation.

In June, Promise Arizona sent flower bouquets to McCain and Sen. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., to thank them for writing and helping to pass the Senate bill.

"Republicans need to see (immigration reform) as an opportunity," said Petra Falcon, Promise Arizona's executive director. "It's an opportunity for the GOP to turn around its image and get to working on other things. Immigration reform should be an easy answer."

Critics of immigration reform say they intend to make their own points at town halls this month.

"We're planning on making all of the events of the congressmen and congresswomen," said Tim Rafferty, president of the group RidersUSA, a Phoenix-area organization that recently put up a billboard promoting Flake's role in "the Flake-Obama amnesty." The group is part of a coalition called "Remember 1986" for the year a previous law provided amnesty to nearly 3 million undocumented immigrants.

'It's not going to be pretty'

While the scope of the mobilization of immigration foes remains to be seen, one leading reform advocate said supporters have a "tremendous amount of activity" planned around the country.

"We're pretty confident that we'll come out of the summer with momentum and we're optimistic that the House of Republicans are going to find a way to get to 'yes,'" said Frank Sharry, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based organization America's Voice. "It's not going to be pretty and it's not going to be quick, but I really do think that they get that doing nothing is not an option ... that as a political party they can't deny that a majority of the people want reform and that a mobilized majority of Latinos want respect."

Sharry noted that the blowback from King's derogatory comments about dreamers already was overshadowing the strides made by McCain, Flake and other Republicans who backed the Senate immigration bill. Sharry and Flake both said the controversy should provide House Republicans extra motivation to get immigration reform done.

"I don't think most Republicans want to be tarred with that brush, and most Republicans don't feel that way," Flake said. "But when people like Steve King keep saying things like that it, unfortunately, kind of puts everybody in the same category. I think people want to resist that and want to do something to show that we want to move ahead."

Other observers also said that there may be cause for cautious optimism about immigration reform's chances in the House.

The Senate took a top-down approach, with a group of influential senators leading the way, while the House is taking more of a bottom-up approach, but House Republicans are grappling with the issues and asking "what can we do, how far can we stretch," said Tamar Jacoby, president of ImmigrationWorks USA, a coalition of business groups that backs immigration reform.

More Republicans are talking about a way to achieve legal status for undocumented immigrants without a special path to citizenship, Jacoby said. And from her perspective, the House's take on workplace enforcement, a lower-skilled worker program and border security might turn out better than the Senate's.

"The House could come through in ways that really would advance the ball and be helpful and be part of the solution," she said. "It's not going to be the Senate way, but I don't think the question is going to be the Senate way or nothing."

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