

# McConnell won't block immigration bill from hitting Senate floor

By Alexander Bolton - 05/21/13 05:13 PM ET

Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell (Ky.) on Tuesday said he would not try to block immigration reform from reaching the floor despite the opposition of some conservative leaders.

The green light from McConnell is a promising development for the 800-plus-page bill from the Gang of Eight that was unveiled at the beginning of the month.

While McConnell stopped short of pledging his support for the legislation, he praised the Gang of Eight's work and said he is "hopeful" of passing a comprehensive immigration fix through the Senate.

"The status quo is not good, the current situation is not good," McConnell said of the nation's immigration system, which his colleagues frequently describe as broken.

"With regard to getting started on the bill, it's my intention — if there is a motion to proceed required — to vote for the motion to proceed so we can get on the bill and see if it we're able to pass a bill that actually moves the ball in the right direction," he said.

McConnell praised the work of Sens. John McCain (R-Ariz.), Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) and other members of the Gang of Eight, who crafted the comprehensive legislation during months of private negotiations.

"The Gang of Eight has made a substantial contribution to moving the issue forward. So far, I'm told that the Judiciary Committee has not in any fundamental way undone the agreement reached by the eight senators, so I'm hopeful we'll be able to get a bill we can pass here in the Senate."

McConnell's comments came a day after a group of influential conservative leaders circulated a letter urging senators to scrap the entire bill, which the Senate Judiciary Committee began marking up in early May and hopes to finish this week.

The minority leader, who is running for reelection in 2014, immediately took fire from his right flank.

"Schumer's immigration reform bill might play well with McConnell's base of donors and establishment consultants who desire to remake the party, but it won't play well with his constituents," Daniel Horowitz wrote on RedState.com, an influential conservative website.

"It's pretty surprising. Usually McConnell waits until the last minute to take a position on a controversial issue. Now he's out there on the record hoping for amnesty," said Matt Hoskins, executive director of the Senate Conservatives Fund. "This could create some real problems for

him back home. It gives the grassroots in Kentucky another reason to support a primary challenger."

The Senate immigration reform bill has gained new momentum even as efforts to craft a bipartisan deal in the House have faltered.

House Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer (Md.) on Tuesday suggested that House Republicans should prepare to take up the Senate legislation, if the House doesn't have an alternative.

"There's no consensus on a bill yet in the House, so the Senate is far ahead of us," he said. "If the Senate passes a bill ... that would reflect a pretty broad, bipartisan support of that bill, and I would think that that would be a good basis for our discussion here."

Rubio on Tuesday said the immigration bill still faces a tough road to Senate passage once it hits the floor next month.

"Democrats are saying they won't vote for the bill, at least two Democrats have said they won't vote for the bill unless some of the border things are improved, so we have enough things to do as it is," Rubio said.

Sens. Mark Begich (Alaska) and Mark Pryor (Ark.), two of the most vulnerable Democrats facing reelection in 2014, have declined to commit to backing the legislation.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) said the Democratic Caucus would largely stick together on the immigration bill.

"I think Sen. Rubio — I appreciate the hard work that he's done on this. I think he should be worrying about Republicans, not Democrats on the immigration bill," he said.

Schumer, the lead Democratic sponsor of the legislation, made substantial progress toward expanding Republican support for the bill outside the Gang of Eight by striking a deal Tuesday with Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) on H-1B visas.

Hatch said the agreement would secure his vote to move the legislation out of the Judiciary Committee, but cautioned he is still undecided about final passage on the Senate floor.

The agreement modified amendments Hatch had proposed to ease restrictions on visas for high-skill workers, but it left labor unions unsatisfied.

"We remain opposed to Hatch's amendments that would undermine American workers' access to the jobs of the future," said Jeff Hauser, a spokesman for the AFL-CIO.

Hatch's language shields many companies from the bill's original requirement that employers filing visa petitions must first offer jobs to equally qualified U.S. workers. The Hatch-Schumer compromise limits this requirement to "H-1B skilled worker-dependent companies." Such companies are defined as having 15 percent of their workforce holding H-1B visas.

Another Hatch provision shields non-H-1B-dependent companies by allowing them to merely stipulate that they do not have the intent to displace U.S. workers.

The Schumer-Hatch deal accepts the original intent standard for non-H-1B companies but only for science, technology, engineering and math positions, commonly referred to as STEM. For all other professions, there would remain a strict prohibition against displacing workers within 90 days of visa petitions.

Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.), who initially opposed Hatch's proposed changes, said he hoped his colleague would reward Democrats for compromising.

"Sen. Hatch, a number of us, myself included, have really leaned a long way in your direction to get your support for immigration reform," Durbin said in a direct entreaty to his colleague at the Judiciary markup.

"We made concessions I never thought we'd have to make after the Gang of Eight reached agreement but we made those concessions to win your support. We need your support," he added.

Read more: <http://thehill.com/homenews/senate/301047-mccconnell-hopefully-of-passing-senate-immigration-reform-bill>