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Reid Hits Pause Button on Immigration

By Carl Hulse

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Senator Harry Reid retreated today from having the Senate move quickly on immigration law changes, saying any overhaul would have to wait.

Senator Reid spoke to reporters today at the Capitol. Manuel Balce Ceneta/Associated Press
Senator Reid at the Capitol.

“We won’t get to immigration reform this work period,” Mr. Reid, Democrat of Nevada and the majority leader, told reporters after the private weekly luncheon of Democratic senators.

Over the weekend, Mr. Reid raised the hopes of immigration advocates by suggesting at a rally in Las Vegas that he was ready to put immigration on the legislative front burner now that health care legislation was out of the way and Congress was returning from a two-week break.

“We’re going to come back, we’re going to have comprehensive immigration reform now,” he said in a speech to more than 6,000 people, mostly immigrants.

The declaration caught lawmakers and Obama administration officials off guard since the politically dicey subject was not on the immediate agenda. While it can be a winning issue among Latino groups and others, it can pose serious problems for Democrats in more conservative states while riling up the conservative Republican base. Senators have shown little appetite for taking on the issue.

Aides to Mr. Reid said he never meant to imply that he was going ahead immediately and that Democrats, under the leadership of Senator Charles E. Schumer of New York, were still putting together a bill.

“Once a bill is drafted, we hope to get it on the floor as quickly as possible,” Jim Manley, a spokesman for Mr. Reid, said.

The “work period” Mr. Reid mentioned referred to the seven-week stretch until Memorial Day that will most likely be dominated by a major fight over new rules governing the financial services industry and stalled White House nominations.

In reality, the immigration wait could be significantly longer since the Senate in the summer will be contending with a Supreme Court vacancy and the members of the Judiciary Committee who will be involved also have jurisdiction over immigration law.

The question for Mr. Reid now is whether in trying to rally Latino supporters back home, he will face a backlash for raising expectations.