

Rubio Outlines Bold Plan Giving 12 Million Illegals Legal Status

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By: Sandy Fitzgerald

U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio is developing a wide-ranging immigration reform plan — including steps to give more than 12 million illegals currently in the U.S. legal status — in an effort to seize the initiative on a contentious issue that polls show is hurting the Republican Party with the nation's rapidly growing Hispanic population.

Rubio laid out the broad outline of his plan in an interview with the weekend edition of the Wall Street Journal, at the same time President Obama announced he would push a comprehensive immigration plan of his own this March.

Surprisingly, both hold similar goals — creating a process in which undocumented workers in the U.S. can gain status and at the same time create a potential path to citizenship at some point in the future.

New York's Democratic Sen. Chuck Schumer predicted immigration will soon take center stage in Washington, sweeping other issues to the side.

“This is so important now to both parties that neither the fiscal cliff nor guns will get in the way,” Schumer, who heads up bipartisan Congressional efforts on immigration, told The New York Times.

Republican lawmakers have told Newsmax that Rubio's plan could pass muster, even with immigration hardliners, if the plan included a significant restitution for illegals to pay and began taxing them for their work here.

Critically, Republicans want to ensure newly documented workers don't get citizenship too soon, with many advocating a minimum 10-year window before newly legal residents could acquire citizenship.

But the Republicans have to walk a political tightrope. After President Obama handily won re-election, garnering the support of 71 percent of Hispanic voters, the GOP has been anxious to woo this key swing ethnic group.

At the same time, Republicans fear that the nation's delicate political balance would move in favor of the Democratic Party if election rolls swelled too quickly with new immigrant voters.

Rubio, in his interview, made clear that his Republican plan differs from the president's in its phased approach. He argues it should create a series of legislative bills on immigration reform

rather than one omnibus bill envisioned by the president.

The Florida Republican, one of the nation's best-known Hispanic leaders and an oft-mentioned candidate for president in 2016, is preparing the first such bill, one that will provide legal status specifically for young illegal immigrants, known as Dreamers, who came to the United States as children.

Rubio's plan also will include penalties for those already in the country, but notably doesn't call for tougher border enforcement because he believes the sweeping reforms will deter future waves of illegals from landing on America's shores.

Rubio, the son of Cuban-American exiles, is making immigration one of his primary issues in 2013, the Times reported Sunday.

Rubio says his piecemeal approach will be more successful, since lawmakers will get better results if the politically and practically tangled problems of the immigration system are handled separately.

Rubio, however, told reporters last week that the piecemeal approach was "not a line in the sand" for him.

He does, however, demand that any legalization measure should not be unfair to immigrants who played by the rules and applied to become residents through legal channels.

Specifically, Rubio's proposals would allow illegal immigrants to gain temporary status so they could remain in the country and work, according to the Times. Then they would be sent to the back of the line in the existing system to apply to become permanent residents, and eventually citizenship.

Republicans "are going to have a struggle speaking to a whole segment of the population about our principles of limited government and free enterprise if they think we don't want them here," Rubio told the Times.

The Wall Street Journal revealed other key parts of Rubio's plan:

- Some 12 million illegals residing in the U.S. could begin the process of becoming legal by identifying themselves to federal authorities and being fingerprinted. If they have not committed any crime, demonstrate that they have been in the U.S. for a while, and then pay a fine and taxes, they could enter a "limbo status," Rubio said. "Assuming they haven't violated any of the conditions of that status," newly documented workers can apply for permanent residency and potentially citizenship, he added.
- A rise in the cap for people who bring investment or other skills into the country. Rubio noted the United States doesn't produce enough science, math or engineering graduates to fill high-tech posts. The number of those people allowed in could be adjusted according to demand, Rubio noted, saying, "I don't think there's a lot of concern in this country that we'll somehow get overrun by Ph. D.s and entrepreneurs."

- A weakening of the family reunification aspects of current immigration law. "I'm a big believer in family-based immigration," he says. "But I don't think that in the 21st Century we can continue to have an immigration system where only 6.5 percent of people who come here, come here based on labor and skill. We have to move toward merit and skill-based immigration."
- A guest-worker program to help meet the needs of American growers. Most of the 1.6 million agricultural laborers in the United States are illegal immigrants, and Rubio noted American produce could not be picked without them. He wants the country to have a number of visas that are provided through a guest-worker program that is sufficient to address growers' needs for pickers. "The goal is to give American agriculture a reliable work force and to give protection to these workers as well," Rubio told the Journal. "When someone is [undocumented] they're vulnerable to being exploited."

"Every country in the world has immigration laws and expects to enforce them, and we should be no different," Rubio told the Journal.

Rubio said he wants the reform to come through in a comprehensive package of bills, possibly four or five instead of one omnibus, that would move through Congress concurrently because he knows how bad policy easily sneaks into big bills.

This isn't Rubio's first proposal on immigration matters. He is a co-sponsor for the E-Verify law, which if passed will require employers to check workers' legal statuses against a federal database. Critics have complained the database is faulty and the law turns employers into immigration agents and pushes illegal workers into hiding.

Rubio, though, said workplace enforcement is essential for reform, especially if his plans for expanding guest-worker and high-tech visas come through.

"You want to protect those folks that are coming here," he said. "You're not protecting them if you allow their wages and their status to be undermined by further illegal immigration in the future."

Rubio said he believes people who come here unlawfully with their parents should be accommodated quickly to gain a way to become naturalized citizens.

Rubio tried last year to get support for his immigration reform ideas, but his fellow Republicans didn't like how certain provisions would allow some illegals to obtain citizenship.

But his efforts caught President Obama's eye, and the president ended up offering two-year reprieves from deportation, helping him win the Hispanic vote.

But Rubio says Obama's action may have set back the reform cause some. Still, he is ready to take on further immigration reform, even though comprehensive efforts failed twice already under George W. Bush's administration, and Obama failed to act on reform in his first term.

Rubio told the Journal that Obama has "not done a thing" on reform and may want to keep it

alive as a Democratic platform, but at the same time, “maybe he's interested in his legacy” and will be willing to make a deal.

But immigration reform won't be all the GOP needs to attract the Hispanic vote, Rubio said.

“The immigration issue is a gateway issue for Hispanics, no doubt about it,” he said. “No matter what your stance is on a number of other issues, if people somehow come to believe that you don't like them or want them here, it's difficult to get them to listen to anything else.”

<http://www.newsmax.com/Newsfront/rubio-immigration-plan-illegal/2013/01/13/id/471223>