

Secretive House group close to immigration-reform agreement

By Russell Berman - 02/04/13 05:00 AM ET

A bipartisan group of House negotiators is even further along in drafting a comprehensive immigration overhaul than its counterpart in the Senate, but the path to passage in the lower chamber is lined with thorns.

Republican House leaders from Speaker John Boehner (Ohio) on down have not decided how to handle the vexing issue, even as they have voiced general support for “addressing” it in 2013.

For now, Boehner and his lieutenants are keeping a watchful eye both on the Senate and a secretive band of reformers in the House, whose work the Speaker himself thrust into the open during a speech to the Ripon Society last month.

That group, sources say, is trying to release a draft bill directly before or after President Obama’s State of the Union address on Feb. 12. Releasing an actual legislative text would put the House group out in front of the coalition of eight Republicans and Democrats in the Senate, who issued only a five-page framework of principles on Jan. 28.

Yet how fast that legislation would move through the lower chamber remains an equally important question.

The new chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R-Va.), signaled in an interview that the panel would move at a deliberate pace on immigration, in part because Republican leaders need to educate more than 100 first- and second-term members who Goodlatte said “know very little” about the complexities of immigration law.

Goodlatte is holding the panel’s first full hearing on immigration on Tuesday — the first of what he told The Hill would be a “long series of hearings” on the issue. Those hearings are likely to precipitate the marking up of any legislation, although the chairman did not rule out the possibility that bills would move faster.

“We’re going to be aggressively pursuing the issue to see if we can do something that is — I won’t call it all-encompassing — but that encompasses a number of the different issues that are addressed in immigration,” Goodlatte said.

Top Republicans also have not ruled out a piecemeal approach to immigration, a strategy that many conservatives favor but which advocates of a comprehensive measure say would be unworkable.

“I am confident that we will pass legislation dealing with immigration,” Goodlatte said, “but I don’t know the extent of what we can do yet, because the members need to be educated, the issues need to be discussed, and a lot of questions need to be answered about where on a spectrum between deportation

and citizenship we can find common ground to bring people who are living in the shadows out of the shadows.”

The status of the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants looms as a potential sticking point for any comprehensive agreement. While many conservatives view any move to grant them legal status as amnesty, the Senate framework endorses a path to citizenship that is linked to enhancements in border security. Obama, meanwhile, has backed a smoother path to citizenship, which would not be contingent upon border security being strengthened in advance.

More clues to the House GOP leadership’s strategy may come Tuesday when Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) is expected to address immigration in a wide-ranging policy speech.

“I genuinely think leadership wants to get a bill passed,” said Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart (R-Fla.), a longtime advocate of immigration reform who, according to several sources, is one of the six core members of the House group.

Unlike the more public Senate effort, the House immigration working group has toiled in secret for nearly four years, and its members have tried — with mixed success — to maintain its cloak-and-dagger aura since Boehner touted its progress in a private Jan. 22 speech that The Hill detailed last week.

While agreeing to speak generally on the push for an immigration overhaul, Diaz-Balart coyly refused to confirm his widely known participation in the group.

“Can I say something that I’ve always wanted to say? I can neither confirm nor deny that,” Diaz-Balart said in a phone interview before breaking out in a laugh. “I’m sorry. I’ve always wanted to say that, and it’s not like you ever have an opportunity to say that!”

Sources confirmed the other core members of the House group as Democratic Reps. Luis Gutierrez (Ill.), Xavier Becerra (Calif.) and Zoe Lofgren (Calif.), and Republican Reps. John Carter (Texas) and Sam Johnson (Texas). Other members have attended meetings from time to time, and conservative Reps. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) and Raul Labrador (R-Idaho) have had conversations about immigration reform with members of the coalition, according to sources familiar with the talks.

Boehner told the Ripon Society, a Republican advocacy organization, that the House immigration group “basically [has] an agreement,” although an aide familiar with the effort described that assessment as overly optimistic.

“They’re not there yet,” the aide said. “They have not come to agreement on some of the big stuff.”

Yet because the House group is working on actual legislative language rather than a broader outline of principles, the talks are at a more advanced stage than the Senate group led by Sens. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) and John McCain (R-Ariz.).

A significant concern for members of the House working group is whether their proposal could emerge intact from the Judiciary Committee, which includes several conservatives who have long resisted efforts

at comprehensive immigration reform, including Reps. Steve King (R-Iowa), Louie Gohmert (R-Texas) and the panel's former chairman, Rep. Lamar Smith (Texas).

None of the core Republican lawmakers of the immigration working group sit on the Judiciary Committee.

Boehner has pledged to his members a renewed commitment to regular legislative order, meaning immigration reform measures would likely have to pass through the Judiciary Committee rather than going directly to the floor.

"There's not been a firm or final decision" on the House path forward on immigration, a Republican leadership aide said.

Goodlatte said he has been talking with the House coalition and the committee is "very interested in seeing what work product they can produce."

Yet while Obama has pressed for swift action and wants to sign an immigration overhaul before the end of the year, Goodlatte is not committing to a timetable.

"I don't view it as a race. I view it as getting it right," he said. "We want to get it done quickly, but getting it right trumps that."

Members of the House coalition have voiced optimism in recent days. Still, they understand the difficulty of passing a major bill in the polarized political climate.

"This is going to be a heavy lift, a very heavy lift," Diaz-Balart said.

Boehner has made clear that the House will prioritize debt and deficit issues in the next few months, but unless the efforts in the Senate break down quickly, he likely won't be able to avoid a difficult political decision when it comes to immigration.

"Boehner's got to make some tough choices about how he handles his caucus," said the congressional aide familiar with the House immigration reform push.

The Speaker is getting help from a key ally, however, in Ryan, the 2012 Republican vice presidential nominee. Days after losing the vice presidency, Ryan approached Gutierrez, the Democratic point man on immigration, in the House gym and told him he wanted to work with him. Ryan also directed Gutierrez to speak with Labrador, a deeply conservative former immigration attorney who is close to many of the most hard-line House Republicans.

Ryan has since endorsed the immigration reform principles put forward by Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), although he has not yet embraced the framework — including the path to citizenship — released by the Senate group that Rubio joined.

Read more: <http://thehill.com/homenews/house/280767-secret-house-group-close-to-immigration-reform-agreement#ixzz2JydgOwCU>