Silicon Valley readies immigration push

By Jennifer Martinez - 10/22/13 05:52 AM ET

LOS ANGELES — The tech industry is beginning a full-throttle push for immigration reform now that the government shutdown fight is over.

Silicon Valley groups and top executives like Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg are planning a flurry of events and media campaigns aimed at pressuring the House to vote on immigration bills before the end of the year.

"Despite the public perception of immigration reform being dead or on the back burner, we believe there's an opportunity to make progress this calendar year," said Peter Muller, director of government relations at Intel.

"We think there is an opportunity — there's a chance — for bills to move to the floor and be considered by the House in the next month or two, and that's the final step to getting us to a final product."

The renewed push for action will include "fly-in" trips to Washington, print and social media campaigns and even a "hackathon" event in Silicon Valley that will be headlined by big names in the industry.

The political advocacy group co-founded by Zuckerberg is also ramping up its efforts.

FWD.us is co-sponsoring a trip to Capitol Hill next week with a diverse coalition of groups that support immigration reform, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Bibles Badges and Businesses, and the Partnership for a New American Economy, an advocacy group co-chaired by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer, News Corp. CEO Rupert Murdoch and other top executives.

Roughly 200 representatives are expected to canvass Capitol Hill early next week and meet with lawmakers, chiefly House Republicans, to discuss the need for immigration reform, according to FWD.us Executive Director Todd Schulte.

"The fly-in is an important thing to look at, where you have a couple hundred people come into town that highlight the broad support for immigration reform," Schulte said.

Next month, Zuckerberg, LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman, Dropbox CEO Drew Houston and Groupon founder Andrew Mason will be on hand at a "DREAMer Hackathon" event hosted by FWD.us that's intended to put the spotlight on what they say is the urgent need for comprehensive immigration reform.

The event — which will take place at LinkedIn's Mountain View, Calif., headquarters — represents a pivot for the tech industry. In previous years, tech companies had pushed Congress

to focus solely on reforming the immigration rules for highly skilled and educated foreign workers.

Young immigrants who came to the United States illegally with their families, often called "Dreamers" in relation to the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, will build digital tools and applications at the "hackathon" event that help promote FWD.us' advocacy efforts for immigration reform. The projects will include building digital tools that help immigration reform supporters tell their stories or contact Congress, according to FWD.us.

Zuckerberg, Hoffman and the other tech executives will advise these illegal immigrants as they work on their projects during the hackathon and provide feedback.

"We think it's a great opportunity to highlight the potential of 'Dreamers' and why we need comprehensive immigration reform," Schulte said. "By having these incredible kids coming together with other programmers, we're not only going to highlight exactly why our nation needs to fix our broken immigration system, we're going to help create better advocacy to make that happen."

Back in Washington, the Consumer Electronics Association (CEA), one of the country's largest tech trade groups, is planning its own lobbying blitz for immigration reform.

"We're going to keep the pressure on," said Veronica O'Connell, vice president of congressional affairs at the CEA. "We are committed as an association and as an industry to keep up the momentum as much as we can and work until it's done."

Tech representatives acknowledge privately that moving the needle on immigration reform in the House this year will be a challenge, and that work is expected to spill over into 2014.

But some argue immigration reform could be a winning issue for House Republicans at a time when they need to repair their party's image.

"House Republicans need a win right now. They need to have something positive to say they're for," said a tech lobbyist. "They're trying to turn attention away from what's happened, and this could be one of those things."

Tech representatives said they see encouraging signs in the House, where top Republicans are attempting to craft legislation that deals with the thorniest piece of the debate: how to deal with the millions of immigrants living in the country illegally.

While the legislation does not cover the industry's main priority in the immigration fight — securing more green cards and visas for high-skilled foreign workers — tech representatives believe it will give discussions around immigration reform a jolt in the House.

Industry representatives are looking forward to seeing legislation from House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) that would offer a path to citizenship to young immigrants.

Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.) has also started work on a bill that would deal with the immigrants living in the U.S. illegally, and has been briefing stakeholders on it for feedback, according to three people familiar with the matter. It's unclear when Issa will put the bill forward, sources say, but his aim is to jump-start a discussion in the House about the divisive issue.

A spokeswoman for Issa declined to comment.

The House Judiciary Committee has already approved a set of four immigration bills that address topics ranging from an agricultural guest-worker program to E-Verify improvements. A tech industry-backed bill by Issa, the SKILLS Visa Act, was also among the immigration bills approved by the committee.

It's unclear what Judiciary Committee Chairman Rep. Bob Goodlatte's (R-Va.) next move will be on immigration reform. A Judiciary Committee aide said in a statement that reforming the nation's broken immigration policy remains a priority for the panel.

Intel's Muller said in the meetings he's had with House Republicans, members have expressed an "interest and willingness" to fix the system.

"Putting the pieces together in a way to build a majority is going to be a challenge and it's tough, but I think our meetings have told us that there's a willingness and interest in a majority of the majority to move forward and try to figure this out," he said.

http://thehill.com/blogs/hillicon-valley/technology/329747-silicon-valley-readies-all-out-push-for-immigration-reform