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Senators draft plan to rework U.S. immigration policy

By Spencer S. Hsu

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Sens. Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.) announced the building blocks Thursday for a new push in Congress to overhaul the nation's immigration laws, outlining a plan to require U.S. citizens and legal immigrants to obtain a new high-tech Social Security card tied to their fingerprints or other biometric identifiers and to create a system to bring in temporary workers as the U.S. economy demands.

The immigration "blueprint," outlined in an opinion column posted on The Washington Post's Web site, drew an immediate vow of support from President Obama, who urged Congress "to act at the earliest possible opportunity."

"I . . . pledge to do everything in my power to forge a bipartisan consensus on this important issue so we can continue to move forward on comprehensive immigration reform," Obama said in a statement released by the White House. Obama congratulated Schumer and Graham on what he called "a promising, bipartisan framework which can and should be the basis for moving forward."

In the editorial, Graham and Schumer shied away from details, and did not say when they would produce a bill.

Advocates set an April deadline, but that would require additional Republican support. Schumer and Graham asked Obama at a Tuesday meeting to help in coming days, according to a source familiar with talks.

Opponents noted that Congress failed in 2006 and 2007 to pass similar legislation backed by President George W. Bush that proposed tougher enforcement at the border and at U.S. workplaces, a program to bring in guest workers for U.S. employers, and a path to gain legal status for many of the estimated 10.8 million illegal immigrants living in the United States.

Congressional supporters, whose ideas track those proposals, have labored under a self-imposed deadline, hoping to advance a bill to the Senate floor before Memorial Day. Lawmakers do not want to hold a contentious debate over immigration policies close to fall elections at a time of high unemployment.

Latino groups, immigrant advocates, religious organizations and others who support an immigration overhaul have expressed growing frustration as time appears to be running out. Immigrant activists called for a march on Washington on Sunday to press the administration, saying Obama was not delivering on a 2008 campaign pledge to advance legislation.

This announcement Thursday appeared timed ahead of the march, and followed a White House meeting Tuesday between Obama and the senators.

Still, White House officials indicate the issue has fallen down their priority list, as they struggle to push health-care legislation through Congress. In Thursday's White House briefing, Obama press secretary Robert Gibbs said the administration's next two top priorities are financial regulatory reform and campaign finance legislation.

Schumer and Graham said the "four pillars" of their plan would not only help end illegal immigration but fuel the U.S. economy.

"Ending illegal immigration, however, cannot be the sole objective of reform. Developing a rational legal immigration system is essential to ensuring America's future economic prosperity," the senators wrote.

Besides creating a to-be-determined system to regulate the future flow of temporary workers in consultation with labor unions and U.S. business groups, the senators said, their plan would award permanent residency to immigrants who receive advanced degrees from a U.S. university in science, technology, engineering or math.

An improved tamper-proof Social Security card would let employers verify that holders' identity and that they are authorized to work in the United States, based on a machine reader that would confirm an individual's fingerprints or eye scan, the senators said. Border security and enforcement within the nation's borders would be increased.

As in earlier efforts, the senators would grant legal status to illegal immigrants who have not committed felonies, and who admit they broke the law by entering the country illegally, then agree to perform community service, pay fines and back taxes, pass background checks and learn English.

Reaction to the senators' and White House statements fell along predicted lines, with opponents dismissing the plan as an "amnesty" for illegal immigrants, and supporters calling it a necessary but insufficient "first step" to changing the law.

"This so-called comprehensive immigration reform really means amnesty for the 10 to 20 million illegal immigrants in America today. What part of the word 'illegal' doesn't the president understand?" said Rep. Brian Bilbray (R-Calif.), chairman of the House Immigration Reform Caucus, which opposed past legislation and said it seeks a White House invitation to promote its own "bipartisan solutions."

Ali Noorani, executive director of the National Immigration Forum and chair of the advocacy group Reform Immigration for America, called the senators' statement "a down payment on the president's promise to put the full weight of the White House behind bipartisan reform legislation." Noorani said Reform Immigration would work "to ensure that 2010 is the year that Congress finally fixes America's long-broken immigration system."