

U.S. Senate takes up contentious immigration issue

WASHINGTON | Fri Jun 7, 2013 3:37pm EDT

(Reuters) - The U.S. Senate plunged into the contentious issue of overhauling America's immigration rules on Friday, with a vote expected by the end of June on legislation that could define President [Barack Obama's](#) final years in office.

The "Border Security, Economic Opportunity and Immigration Modernization Act," a nearly 900-page reworking of the 27-year-old U.S. immigration law, faces a tough fight in the Democratic-held Senate and an even harder battle in the Republican-dominated House of Representatives later this year.

At its core is a plan to move 11 million people living in the United States illegally - many of whom came from [Mexico](#) years ago - onto a 13-year path to citizenship.

At the same time, the legislation would spend around \$6 billion more to strengthen border security and change the way temporary visas are issued, putting more emphasis on helping U.S. farmers and high-tech industries get foreign labor.

"It is gratifying to see the momentum behind this package of common-sense reforms, which will make our country safer and help 11 million undocumented immigrants get right with the law," Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said.

While Reid promised to give senators ample opportunity to change the bill - a few dozen amendments are expected - Reid warned that he would not allow opponents to debate the measure endlessly. The Nevada Democrat said work on the bill would be wrapped up before the July 4 recess.

The bill is problematic for many Senate Republicans, who see it as rewarding people who broke the law by entering the United States illegally.

"We can't reject a dutiful, good person to America and then turn around and allow someone else who came in illegally to benefit from breaking our laws to the disadvantage of the good person," said Republican Senator Jeff Sessions of Alabama.

Sessions and other senators are expected to push for greater border security efforts and to try to eliminate or toughen the pathway to citizenship for the 11 million.

ROUGH ROAD AHEAD

Lynn Tramonte, deputy director of the pro-immigration reform group America's Voice Education Fund, said such amendments were "about limiting the path to citizenship, making it more expensive, longer, delaying its start, having few people be eligible in the first place."

The obstacles the bill faces were apparent in the House on Thursday, when Republicans narrowly won passage of legislation encouraging deportations of young illegal immigrants brought into the United States by their parents. A year ago, Obama acted to temporarily suspend deportations of such people, some of whom were infants when they arrived.

The immigration legislation represents a big test for the highly polarized and unpopular Congress, which has been unable to handle even basic chores, like agreeing to a federal budget.

It may be an even bigger test for Obama, who earlier this year failed to get the Senate to approve another major legislative objective, a crackdown on gun violence.

Backers of the Senate bill were confident it would be approved by the upper house within a few weeks, putting the onus on the House to tackle the immigration overhaul, a top issue with Hispanic voters who mainly backed Obama in last year's Presidential election.

Republican Senator John McCain, a member of the bipartisan "Gang of Eight" that wrote the bill, said he was optimistic it would get well over the 60 votes needed in the 100-seat Senate.

"We've got over 60 votes. I'm confident of that," the Arizona senator told Reuters.

McCain said he believed that by the time the amendment process ended, backers would have 70 votes, the number supporters are aiming for to put pressure on the House.

"There are some real concerns about border security that we have to work through, but I'm confident that we will be able to do so," McCain said.

But Republican Senator Mike Lee of Utah cited the emerging scandal involving a U.S. spy agency's domestic surveillance activity to oppose the immigration bill, which he said would authorize another excessive federal effort.

"Did the American people have any idea that the (2001) PATRIOT Act would empower the National Security Agency to spy on all Americans through their cell phones and [computers](#)?", he said during the Senate debate.

"What makes any of us - least of all any conservative - believe this immigration bill is going to work out any better?" Lee added, calling for an incremental rather than a comprehensive approach to immigration reform.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/07/us-usa-immigration-idUSBRE9560WT20130607>