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Senate Backs Bush Immigration Reform Plan

By Deborah Tate
Capitol Hill
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AP Photo

The U.S. Senate is supporting President Bush's call for a comprehensive approach to immigration reform that includes boosting border security while simultaneously addressing the millions of illegal immigrants in the United States. In a key vote Tuesday, lawmakers rejected a plan that would have focused exclusively on securing the U.S. borders before consideration of other immigration reforms.

Patrons at El Portal restaurant watch President Bush deliver his immigration speech Monday

The immigration measure that was rejected Tuesday was sponsored by Republican Senator Johnny Isakson of Georgia. He had argued the United States should have better control of its borders before considering a guest worker program and citizenship for the millions of illegal immigrants already in the country.

"The premise is you do not want to create an attraction for more [illegal immigrants] to come until the border is secure," he said.

But most senators saw it differently, voting 55 to 40 against the amendment, arguing it would undermine President Bush's call for comprehensive immigration reform.

The Senate then voted (79 to 16) for a Democrat-sponsored alternative that calls for moving forward with a guest worker program that would give undocumented workers the possibility of gaining U.S. citizenship.

The amendment's sponsor, Senator Ken Salazar of Colorado, says the United States can no longer avoid dealing with illegal immigrants who are already in the country.

"I do not believe we should allow this crisis to fester," he said. "I do not believe we should continue to tolerate the shadow society for 11 million undocumented workers in this country today."

The vote is seen as a victory for President Bush, who outlined his immigration reform proposals in a nationally televised address Monday night.

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Besides endorsing a temporary guest worker plan that would offer illegal immigrants a path to U.S. citizenship, President Bush also proposed deploying up to 6,000 National Guard troops along the U.S. border with Mexico.

Many lawmakers have welcomed the call to boost border security, but are concerned the initiative would further burden the National Guard, which is already stretched thin by deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist of Tennessee says he hopes the Senate will vote on a completed immigration reform bill, with provisions for a guest worker program and opportunity for a path to U.S. citizenship for illegal immigrants, by the end of next week.

The House has already passed its own version of immigration reform. The House measure does not include a guest worker program, but does call for a fence to be built along much of the U.S. border with Mexico and would impose more harsh penalties for illegal immigrants, making it a felony to be in the country illegally.

The top Democrat in the Senate, Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, renewed his call on President Bush to denounce the House measure if he wants comprehensive immigration reform to succeed.

"He has to talk about this House bill in a negative fashion," said Mr. Reid. "I call it a monstrous bill and I believe it is a monstrous bill, and the President has yet to say a bad word about this bill."

Congressional negotiators will have to figure out a way to reconcile differences in the separate bills before a final measure can be sent to the President for his signature.



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