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BOEHNER TO RELEASE PRINCIPLES ON IMMIGRATION OVERHAUL

By Laura Meckler
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House Speaker John Boehner is preparing to release a set of principles to guide a House immigration overhaul, including legal status for many of the 11 million people in the U.S. illegally, people familiar with his plans said.

This would represent the first time that House Republican leaders have explicitly endorsed allowing illegal immigrants to remain and work in the U.S. While the document will stop short of the path to citizenship approved by the Senate, it represents a major step toward what immigration advocates and Democrats have long sought.

The principles could be released as early as next week, ahead of the State of the Union speech on Jan. 28, where President Barack Obama is expected to again call on Congress to send him immigration legislation. They will be circulated among House Republicans for possible action this year, though timing for legislation is unclear.

The one-page document, which is being developed by Mr. Boehner's office, contains few details but voices support for the major planks of the comprehensive bill that cleared the Senate last summer. That includes increased border security, stepped up employment verification, a temporary worker program for low-skilled workers, more visas for high-technology workers and a path to citizenship for people brought to the U.S. illegally as children, according to two people who have seen a draft.

These measures would be considered as individual pieces of legislation, not as one big bill, though some pieces might be combined—such as enforcement and legalization.

The document also expresses support for legal status for undocumented immigrants and envisions some sort of legal process by which they admit guilt and pay fines and any back taxes owed. It will also insist that no legalization provisions take effect until border security and other enforcement measures are in place, people familiar with the draft said.

Immigration advocates have pressed for citizenship, not just legalization, for those undocumented residents, saying that anything less would sentence them to permanent second-class status. Legislation that cleared the Senate last summer provides for a 13-year path to citizenship for those who meet qualifications.

Legislation is being developed by House Republicans that wouldn't exclude citizenship for those here illegally. But it rejects what many Republicans see as a "special path" not available to would-be immigrants who didn't break the law. Rather, after people win legal status they could apply for green cards, the same as any other legal immigrant.

Judiciary Committee Chairman Bob Goodlatte (R., Va.) has voiced support for such an approach for months. He signaled openness to legalization again in an interview that aired on Telemundo on Sunday.

"If we can have a way to get that [enforcement measures] up and operating, I see no reason why we can't also have an agreement that shows how people who are not lawfully

here can be able to be lawfully here – able to live here, work here, travel to and from their home country. Be able to own a business, pay their taxes,” he said. “And that is how we’re trying to outline a way to resolve this as one of several of the steps in this step by step approach.”

The emerging GOP approach was welcomed by some immigration advocates, who have grown frustrated waiting for the House to act. Frank Sharry, who leads the influential advocacy group America’s Voice, pointed out that it wasn’t long ago when GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney proposed that the U.S. make life so miserable for illegal immigrants that they voluntarily “self-deport.”

“It is significant that a party that was in favor of self-deportation just in 2012 is moving to embrace legalization for all and citizenship for many,” Mr. Sharry said. “If they’re serious and if they detail it properly and they’re willing to work with Democrats, it’s a promising development.”

Republicans involved said the document will restate their resolve not to compromise any legislation they pass by going to a conference with the Senate, which would be the normal process for resolving differences between legislation passed by the two chambers. It was unclear how the House envisions the process moving forward after it moves its own legislation.

It wasn’t even clear when the House would hold its first immigration votes. Some have pointed to a window this spring, after the bulk of Republican primaries are over. Others have said it makes more sense to move more quickly.