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OBAMA SETS IMMIGRATION ROLLOUT FOR THIS WEEK

By Laura Meckler
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President Barack Obama said he will announce his planned changes to the U.S. immigration system in a speech from the White House on Thursday night, moves that are expected to give temporary legal status to millions of people in the U.S. illegally and spark an ugly fight with Republicans.

The moves, and the GOP response to them, will throw into question vows by both parties to work together in the coming year while reshaping immigration policy for years to come. Chances for legislative action on immigration, already dim, may be extinguished altogether.

The president said his speech will be at 8 p.m. ET, and that he will follow that with an event on Friday at Del Sol High School in Las Vegas, the same school where Mr. Obama gave a major immigration speech in 2013 laying out his principles for legislation that passed the Senate but died in the House.

"Everybody agrees that our immigration system is broken. Unfortunately, Washington has allowed the problem to fester for too long," he said in a video released on the White House's Facebook page on Wednesday afternoon. He said he would use his lawful authority to "make the system work better." He said he will continue to work with Congress to pass bipartisan legislation.

The decision to announce changes this week follows Mr. Obama's promise to take executive actions by year-end aimed at improving the immigration system, after Congress failed to pass legislation. The Senate passed a bipartisan bill in 2013, but it died in the GOP-controlled House.

"As the president has said many times, legislative action is always preferable. But we've waited now for years for Congress to act. And Congress has not acted," Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson said in a discussion at the National Press Club on Wednesday. "In the meantime we've identified a number of executive actions that we can take within our existing legal authority to fix what everyone recognizes is a broken immigration system."

Mr. Obama's plans have set off waves of anger among Republicans, who argue he is exceeding his legal authority and ignoring the will of voters who just delivered the GOP a huge electoral victory. Republican leaders warned the action will "poison the well" for future cooperation on a range of issues.

Michael Steel, a spokesman for House Speaker John Boehner, said in a statement Wednesday, "If 'Emperor Obama' ignores the American people and announces an amnesty plan that he himself has said over and over again exceeds his constitutional authority, he will cement his legacy of lawlessness and ruin the chances for congressional action on this issue – and many others."

The White House has said that whatever steps Mr. Obama takes will be well within the law and that the president will vacate his orders if Congress passes a suitable replacement.

Mr. Obama's decision on timing followed an internal White House debate over whether waiting would have improved the chances of Congress clearing a critical spending bill without getting tangled with immigration.

But opposition has already grown intense among congressional Republicans, and the people close to the process said that announcing it early would give the president and his supporters the ability to aggressively defend and explain the package.

Mr. Johnson said Wednesday the White House action will be "comprehensive" and address border security as well as other issues.

The president faces weak public support for executive action on immigration. A new Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll out Wednesday found 48% of Americans disapprove of him acting alone on immigration, compared with 38% who approve. Among Latinos, 43% say they would approve of Mr. Obama acting alone, versus 37% who oppose.

The centerpiece of his package is expected to expand a 2012 program that offered temporary legal status to young people brought to the U.S. as children, sometimes called Dreamers, to others with deep ties to the U.S.

People who are familiar with White House thinking say others likely to be included are parents of U.S. citizens and legal residents, and possibly parents of Dreamers, as long as they have lived in the U.S. for a minimum number of years. Spouses of citizens might also be included. Mr. Obama is also likely to expand the criteria for the 2012 program so that more Dreamers qualify.

Together, these groups could total some four million people. Added to more than one million Dreamers who are already eligible for deferred action, the total group benefiting from Mr. Obama's actions could approach five million, according to one of the people familiar with the discussions.