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## DEFINING BORDER SECURITY KEY TO TALKS

By Laura Meckler  
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WASHINGTON – How to determine whether the U.S. border with Mexico is secure has emerged as a central battle among senators writing an overhaul of immigration laws.

The senators working on the legislation, four Democrats and four Republicans, say that many of the 11 million people living in the nation illegally should have the chance to become U.S. citizens. But their proposal says that opportunity is "contingent on securing the border" first, and that security provisions must be "complete." They disagree, however, over how to measure those goals.

Republicans want reassurance that the border is so secure that a new wave of illegal crossings won't come in the years ahead. They also hope the emphasis on border security will draw support from conservatives who are opposed to offering citizenship or legal status at all.

Democrats also support beefing up border security, but fear a vague definition of success could mean an indefinite delay in granting citizenship to illegal immigrants. They want the measures of success to be concrete.

Sen. Charles Schumer (D., N.Y.), an author of the Senate framework, has suggested the legislation might, for instance, require that a certain number of border agents be added.

Sen. Dick Durbin (D., Ill.), who is also in the bipartisan group, echoed on Thursday that the enforcement metrics would be objective and clearly defined. "If we made the path to citizenship contingent on a 'safe and secure border' – and just use that phrase – then it's in the eye of the beholder. It'll always be subjective," he said. "The idea behind a metric is to have something measurable."

Sen. Marco Rubio (R., Fla.), who has the difficult task of promoting the immigration overhaul to wary conservatives, has a less specific concept. In an interview on Thursday, he said the path to citizenship must wait until there is a "high probability of being able to intercept people" who are unlawfully crossing or who recently crossed the border.

"Some argue you can measure it by saying, 'If we have 500 border agents, then we'll have a secure border,'" Mr. Rubio said. "I'm more of the belief that we want to actually measure performance, what's actually happening at the border."

"That's one of the debates we're going to have to have: How do we measure this? If it's not something that inspires people's confidence, it's not going to work," Mr. Rubio added.

Other Republicans oppose citizenship, saying it rewards people who broke U.S. law. Some would be willing to give illegal residents legal status short of citizenship. Democrats generally support a path to citizenship.

The Senate framework says a commission of governors, attorneys general and community leaders from along the border would be created to make a recommendation on when

security measures are complete. Mr. Schumer has said the final decision would rest with the secretary of homeland security.

President Barack Obama's own immigration framework doesn't set any benchmarks for border security ahead of a citizenship process. He has said he wouldn't rule out legislation requiring such benchmarks, but he echoed Senate Democrats' concerns.

"What we don't want is to create some vague prospect in the future that somehow comprehensive immigration reform that includes a pathway to citizenship will happen, you know, manana," Mr. Obama told the Spanish-language network Univision on Wednesday, using the Spanish word for "tomorrow." "We want to make sure that we're very clear that this legislation provides a real pathway."

Underlying the debate is a disagreement over how secure the border is today. Republicans tend to argue that there is still a long way to go, while Mr. Obama and other Democrats say there has been progress since 2007, when immigration was last debated.

Amid a lackluster U.S. economy, improved job prospects in Mexico and beefed-up interdiction efforts, the number of illegal immigrants apprehended trying to cross the border in 2011 was 340,252, down 53% since 2008, the Customs and Border Protection agency says.

The Department of Homeland Security says there are now more than 21,000 U.S. Border Patrol agents nationwide, compared with about 10,000 in 2004. The agency also has added about 651 miles of fencing along the 1,969-mile border, effectively meeting a congressional mandate for 652 miles.

Skeptics of the success of interdiction efforts say that the sluggish U.S. economy explains most of the decrease in illegal crossings and predict that without enhanced security, attempts to come to the U.S. without permission would rebound along with the economy.