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HOUSE GROUP WORKS TO PRESENT ITS OWN IMMIGRATION PLAN

By Ashley Parker
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The group met, on and off, in almost complete secrecy for nearly four years. It lost members to political disagreements, and to re-election battles. After the November elections, it regrouped and redoubled its efforts.

Soon, the bipartisan group of about eight House members hopes to unveil its own immigration legislation, adding a voice to a growing swell of politicians – a bipartisan group in the Senate, as well as President Obama – who say they are serious about overhauling the nation's immigration system by the end of the year.

"For the last six or seven years, there had been no one to partner with, but since Nov. 6 there's been a lot of new dance partners, and that's good," said Representative Luis V. Gutierrez, Democrat of Illinois and a member of the group. "The table is filling up with people, and people are talking and they're having conversations."

Aides and members would not confirm on the record the group's exact composition, but they said it had an equal number of Democrats and Republicans. In addition to Mr. Gutierrez, the chairman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus's immigration task force, those involved in the discussions, aides said, include Representatives Xavier Becerra and Zoe Lofgren, both California Democrats; John Yarmuth, Democrat of Kentucky; Representatives John Carter and Sam Johnson, both Texas Republicans; Mario Diaz-Balart, Republican of Florida; and Raúl R. Labrador, Republican of Idaho.

On Tuesday, the House Judiciary Committee is scheduled to hold its first hearing on the immigration issue. The bipartisan group of House members hopes to release legislation of its own, perhaps accompanied by its own set of principles, by Feb. 12, the day Mr. Obama delivers the State of the Union address.

In a town where leaks are the currency of doing business, those with knowledge of the group said the legislators' tight-lipped discipline was remarkable – and necessary.

Immigration is a politically fraught issue, especially in the House, and many of the members wanted the safety of being able to present controversial ideas or walk away without details appearing in the news media. House Republicans involved with the group did not want to be associated with a topic they saw as potentially toxic, particularly with members of their party's more conservative wing.

The group has received far less attention than its Senate counterpart – in part by design, and in part because most lawmakers believe that the Senate will need to take the lead on immigration. Getting to 60 votes there, aides and advocates say, will probably be easier than reaching the 218 votes necessary in the House, where the legislation could face strong opposition from the far right.

But rumors and names of group members began popping up in recent weeks, and Speaker John A. Boehner, Republican of Ohio, confirmed the group's existence last month at a private luncheon, first reported by The Hill newspaper. (During a House recess last week, the group held a conference call to remind its members not to speak to the news media until it was ready to present its proposed legislation.)

"I think there's a bipartisan group of members that have been meeting now for three or four years," Mr. Boehner said at the lunch. "Frankly, I think they basically have an agreement. I've not seen the agreement. I don't know all the pitfalls in it. But it's, in my view, the right group of members."

The group is in many ways a cross-section of the House. On one extreme is Mr. Labrador, a second-term member with Tea Party support; on the other is Mr. Gutierrez, an outspoken proponent of immigration reform who has been critical of Mr. Obama, saying he was moving too slowly. (One Republican aide joked that Mr. Gutierrez was "kind of the Raúl Labrador of the left.")

"You've got folks in this room who are truly, as conservative Republicans would call them, far-left liberals, and you've got some folks in the room who the liberals would call far-right conservatives," said John Stone, a spokesman for Mr. Carter.

Since the election, the group has met at least once a week, for at least an hour, when the House is in session. Those close to the group said its members largely agreed with the broad principles that were released by their Senate counterparts last Monday.

"The goal is to fix what's broken, and it's pretty clear that a lot is broken," Mr. Diaz-Balart said. "Do we recognize that we have a problem with the borders? Yes. Do we recognize that we have a problem with our visa system, where people don't leave the country? Yes. Do we recognize that we have kids who were brought here by their parents and that's an issue we have to deal with? Yes. Do we recognize the need for agricultural workers? Yes."

He added, "The devil is in the details, but I am hopeful that members of Congress who truly want to reach a solution will be able to."

The House and Senate working groups have been in touch. Mr. Gutierrez said he had a productive meeting in December with Senator Marco Rubio, Republican of Florida, and has talked with Senator Robert Menendez, Democrat of New Jersey.

"We are in touch with our counterparts in the House," Senator Charles E. Schumer, a New York Democrat and member of the bipartisan Senate group on immigration, confirmed at a news conference on Thursday.

The House group is working on a timetable similar to the Senate's. After it introduces its legislation, it plans to take it through the committee process and have a vote before the August recess.

"The goal is a bill," Mr. Stone said. "Let's dot the i's and cross the t's, and that's basically where it is, and let's move forward. The goal is as soon as possible."