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IMMIGRATION BILL'S PRICE TAG AN ISSUE

By Sara Murray
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The price tag of a bipartisan proposal to overhaul immigration laws—and whether it will be fully paid for—could be critical to wooing additional GOP lawmakers to sign on to the plan.

The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office has yet to formally evaluate the cost, but a Senate aide estimated Tuesday that it would cost \$17 billion over a decade. Lawmakers and aides said fines and fees would cover that cost and possibly generate a few billion extra. The bill's final price tag is likely to draw particular scrutiny from conservative lawmakers in the House, where budget-cutting has been a top goal.

"Where people will go first is, does the policy work?" said Sen. Bob Corker (R., Tenn.). "Then, secondarily, how do you pay for this?"

Most of the estimated \$17 billion cost would go toward new immigration enforcement measures, according to an aide to a member of the bipartisan group that crafted the legislation. The legislation calls for at least \$4.5 billion for a border-security plan; mandatory use of the federal E-Verify system by all employers to check workers' legal status; and a new system to track people with U.S. visas as they exit from the country. A provision in the bill will also add 3,500 more customs agents.

Lawmakers said those costs would be offset by fines and processing fees for illegal immigrants participating in programs to gain legal status, as well as by additional costs to businesses that want to hire foreigners through work-visa programs.

"There shouldn't be any significant cost in the first 10 to 15 years of it," said Sen. Marco Rubio (R., Fla.), a member of the group that wrote the Senate

Mr. Rubio said that the bill comes with economic benefits that should be taken into account as well.

"I think there are benefits to having people paying taxes that aren't paying taxes now," Mr. Rubio said. "There are benefits to the fact that once people are legalized, they have economic opportunities they don't have now."

Mr. Rubio said the bill also offers benefits to businesses, which would be able to draw from a broader pool of workers under the various visa programs the bill includes.

The text of the immigration legislation hasn't yet been released, but some advocacy groups are already airing their concerns.

Tamar Jacoby, president of employer group ImmigrationWorks USA, said a new program to grant work visas to future low-wage workers was "puny." An organization of faith-based groups pressed for a path to citizenship in seven years, instead of the 13 years prescribed in the bill.

The Dream Action Coalition, a lobbying group for undocumented young people, pressed for looser rules on the types of criminal offenses that could bar immigrants from a path to citizenship.

President Barack Obama said Tuesday, "This bill is clearly a compromise, and no one will get everything they wanted, including me." Still, he added, "I urge the Senate to quickly move this bill forward."

Under the Senate plan, unauthorized immigrants could gain a "provisional" legal status quickly but couldn't gain permanent-resident status for a decade. During that time, they wouldn't be eligible for federal benefits.

That timeline will likely prove important when the Congressional Budget Office assesses the cost, since the agency often scores legislation on a 10-year time frame.

Some provisions of the bill could increase costs to the government. The Senate bill would speed up the green-card process for more than four million people who have been waiting to come to the U.S. legally. Current law says some of those people would be eligible for federal benefits in five years.

If some of the 11 million illegal immigrants who gain provisional status are eligible for refundable tax credits—a point Senate aides disagreed on Tuesday—that also could add to the bill's cost. When the CBO evaluated a 2007 immigration overhaul, it determined that refundable tax credits added nearly \$14 billion to the bill's price.

While the CBO usually evaluates the cost of legislation over a 10-year period, it takes a longer view in some cases. In evaluating the 2007 bill, the CBO noted that immigrants would begin receiving benefits after a decade and ultimately add to the deficit.

"The fact is, you're still talking about lots of long-term costs," said Derrick Morgan, vice president for domestic and economic policy at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank that has taken a skeptical stance toward the bipartisan bill. "What does it do to our fiscal picture overall? That's a critical part of this debate."

The CBO is likely to find that the bill includes provisions that add to federal revenues, such as more people paying taxes, as Mr. Rubio described. The agency took that into account when it pegged a price tag on the 2007 immigration bill and may do so again this time around. Overall, the CBO said the 2007 bill didn't have enough revenue to cover its costs and would have added \$18 billion to the deficit over a decade.

A Senate aide said lawmakers were aiming for a deal that didn't add to the deficit. But if they fell short of that goal under the CBO's evaluation, they could tweak parts of the proposal.

Keeping the price tag low "is important," said Sen. Jeff Flake (R., Ariz.), a member of the Senate group. "Look at our deficit."