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ROMNEY WOOS HISPANICS

By Janet Hook
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Tempe, Ariz. – Mitt Romney mounted a fresh effort to woo Hispanics by seeking their input on economic issues in an Arizona business forum Friday, and by planning a Monday campaign appearance with rising GOP star Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, a Cuban-American.

Meeting with nine Hispanic business leaders and local officials in Tempe Friday, Mr. Romney said he wanted to “get your perspective on what I might do to make it easier for small businesses to thrive, or education to work, or immigration policies to work, if I were so fortunate to become president.”

But the likely GOP presidential nominee heard conflicting messages on the contentious issue of immigration policy, as he was told by one participant to stick to his tough stand on illegal immigration and by another to take a more forgiving approach.

Manuel T. Pacheco, former president of the University of Arizona, urged Mr. Romney to be more open to a compromise on the so-called ‘Dream Act’ – a bill Mr. Romney has promised to veto that would offer a path to citizenship to people who were brought illegally to the U.S. as children if they enrolled in college or the military.

“I think it would be good, from your perspective, if there was a way you could provide at least some signal or glimmer of hope for these students,” said Mr. Pacheco at the half-hour discussion with Mr. Romney at the Arizona Historical Society. “I would urge you to make that nod at some point in the near future.”

Mr. Romney offered no response and then heard a different message from Alice Lara, a consultant who is active in the Arizona Latino Republican Association. “I really do respect and recognize your stance” on illegal immigration, she said. “I want to encourage you to stick close to your conservative principals.”

The event was staged at a time that some of Mr. Romney’s allies are concerned that Hispanics have been turned off by the tough line he and other Republicans have taken on illegal immigrants.

Mr. Rubio has been trying to craft a scaled back, conservative alternative to the Dream Act. Mr. Rubio is considered a possible running mate for Mr. Romney, and a campaign aide confirmed that he will be appearing with Mr. Romney Monday in Pennsylvania.

In advance of Mr. Romney’s Arizona ‘roundtable discussion,’ his campaign circulated an email statement arguing that Hispanic voters have been especially hard hit by economic woes during the Obama years. The campaign said that Hispanics, who make up 16% of the U.S. population, make up 20% of the unemployed.

However, a March 2012 study by the Pew Hispanic Center found that Hispanics, along with Asian Americans, are experiencing a faster rate of job growth than many other demographic groups as the economy has begun to recover.