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HOUSE PANEL SAYS IT WILL OFFER SERIES OF IMMIGRATION BILLS

By Emmarie Huetteman and Ashley Parker
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WASHINGTON — The House Judiciary Committee announced Thursday that it would introduce a series of bills beginning this week to overhaul the nation's immigration system, a move designed to keep the committee in the middle of the debate over the issue, which is now percolating on Capitol Hill, and to press a bipartisan group in the House that has been working in private on its own broad legislation.

Representative Robert W. Goodlatte, Republican of Virginia and the chairman of the committee, said the first of several proposals in the coming weeks would create a temporary guest worker program for agriculture and require employers to use an electronic verification system to check the immigration status of employees.

Mr. Goodlatte made it clear that his committee's intention was to jump-start the debate in the House. The bipartisan House group studying immigration, which has been meeting in secret on and off for about four years, has yet to offer its own proposal.

"At this point in time, we think we can help move the process forward by beginning to examine the legislative details of various ideas that members have brought forward," he said.

Mr. Goodlatte's announcement does, in fact, create a sense of urgency among the House group, particularly its Democratic members, to introduce broad legislation. Many Republicans in the House prefer a piecemeal approach, similar to what Mr. Goodlatte is proposing, though Democrats fear that this approach would make it tough for them to win support for a path to legalization — a crucial part of any immigration overhaul, they say.

The announcement came after the Senate Judiciary Committee this week held the last of three hearings on broad immigration legislation that would tighten border security and offer an eventual path to citizenship for 11 million immigrants already in the country.

Senators John McCain, Republican of Arizona, and Charles E. Schumer, Democrat of New York, both members of the bipartisan group of eight senators who wrote the legislation, said Thursday that they were aiming to win 70 votes in the Senate and hoped to gain the backing of a majority of senators in both parties — a prospect Mr. McCain described as "very doable."

Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont and the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, announced on Thursday that his committee would begin its mark-up of the immigration bill on May 9, shortly after Congress returns from its recess. Consideration of the legislation is expected to last for most of May.

"There's a different mood in the Senate," Mr. Schumer said. "I hope that our immigration bill sets the model for coming bipartisan agreements."

Mr. Goodlatte emphasized that his committee had not decided what should appear in the final legislation, and he did not dismiss the possibility of offering some kind of legal status. He said the committee would examine the Senate proposal and any proposal presented by the House group.

"They have been working on this process for a long, long time," he said, "and we are very hopeful that they can reach a bipartisan agreement on what will be done to address these three major aspects of immigration reform: legal immigration reform, enforcement, and what to do about the legal status of the 11 million or more people who are not here lawfully."

House Democrats remain hopeful that a broad immigration bill will ultimately emerge. "This group has worked long enough that it will work toward producing a good compromise on a total fix to our immigration system — not a partial fix, not a piecemeal fix, but a total fix," Representative Xavier Becerra, Democrat of California and a member of the House bipartisan group, said on Wednesday.

The bipartisan group hopes to introduce its legislation by the end of May, aides said. One holdup has been Republican unwillingness to accept the Senate plan for a temporary guest worker program, which has already been endorsed by leading business and labor groups. House Republicans think the plan is too favorable toward labor, and they would prefer a higher cap on the number of visas for low-skilled workers. (The Senate plan has an annual cap of 200,000.)

"There is reluctance that establishment Republicans like the Chamber of Commerce are cutting deals with big labor," a House aide said, speaking on the condition of anonymity. "That's not where House Republicans see themselves. They think establishment Republicans are the problem."

The House group's legislation will have other differences from the Senate legislation, aides said. The House bill, for instance, will probably offer a 15-year path to citizenship, rather than the 13-year path offered in the Senate plan, though both bills would allow immigrants to earn a green card in 10 years.

Mr. Goodlatte pushed back against criticism that the committee was dragging out the process by proposing changes to the system one by one.

"I would point out that the House group, the bipartisan group that's been negotiating this, has been negotiating it for about four years, so we want to see a product from that group," he said, "but we recognize — and I'm sure they recognize — how difficult it is to work on this issue, and therefore making sure that we take our time is an important part of this process."

Representative Trey Gowdy, Republican of South Carolina and the chairman of a subcommittee on immigration and border security, emphasized that his priority was to put in place effective reform.

"Even ideas that enjoy broad support need to be examined in the public square," Mr. Gowdy said.