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RED-STATE SENATORS CONFIDENT IN IMMIGRATION REFORM PASSAGE

By Michael Hickins
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NEW YORK—Senator Mark Begich (D-Alaska) said Monday he believes “the Senate will come out with a bipartisan [immigration reform] bill.” But he has not committed himself to supporting the bill unless it also strengthens border security, and includes a “meaningful and responsible pathway to citizenship.”

Senator Mark Pryor (D-Ark.), in a separate interview Monday, also predicted passage but refused to commit himself to supporting it until the bill, with its amendments, is sent for a full vote by the Senate Judiciary Committee. Ideally, he said, the bill should reflect a broad consensus and gain passage with “north of 70 votes.”

Immigration reform is a priority for businesses looking to expand the number of non-U.S. workers they can hire, notably for jobs requiring strong technology skills. The bill has been in “mark-up” since last week, giving Judiciary committee members a chance to offer amendments. The process is expected to continue Tuesday. Senators of Republican-leaning states such as Alaska and Arkansas are facing pressure from conservative groups on immigration reform, and both Mr. Begich and Mr. Pryor are running for reelection in 2014 in states where immigration reform is largely unpopular. A broad bipartisan bill would doubtless help both senators defend votes in favor of the bill.

Mr. Pryor said immigration reform is “long overdue” but said his support for the bill is contingent on it containing enforcement processes. Mr. Pryor said he has read the summary of the bill, but not the entirety of the proposed measure, which he said is 800 pages long. He said he’ll read it in its entirety once the final bill reaches the Senate floor, and will decide whether to support it based on “how it’s all going to work in the real world.”

Separately, Mr. Begich also cited enforcement as a prerequisite for his support for the measure. As the WSJ’s Sara Murray reported last month, approximately 40% of undocumented workers in the U.S. arrived legally under visas that have since expired.

As CIO Journal reported, the cap for high-skilled worker applications was reached faster this year than any time since 2008. The government has recently pursued a number of cases against outsourcing companies, notably Infosys Ltd. , which is accused of bringing in workers with fraudulent documentation.

Mr. Pryor said any reform should consider job categories in different lights; “I’m not sure there’s a need” to raise the number of work visas for construction workers and said “we need a cap on H1-B visas” overall. He said reform should reflect a difference between white collar jobs and blue collar jobs, which he said are affected differently by immigration reform. “Technology is the white collar part of the immigration question,” he said.

Mr. Begich said immigration reform would not only help companies fill jobs that are currently open, but encourage foreign students educated in the U.S. to “build their companies here... [and] invest in the country and grow the economy.”

Mr. Pryor credited New York Sen. Charles Schumer (D-NY) for trying to develop a broad consensus over the bill. "I don't want to see a party-line vote," he told CIO Journal. He said the bill is dividing the Republican caucus in Congress because while many social conservatives oppose reform, "the business community is in a very different place."

According to a recent article in the National Review, only 32% of Alaskans and 24% of Arkansans, respectively, support a version of the bill along the lines favored by Sen. Schumer and the so-called Gang of Eight.

The meetings were hosted by Harley Lippman, CEO of Genesis 10, a technology services and domestic outsourcing company based in New York. Mr. Lippman says he supports immigration reform, but is skeptical that U.S. businesses won't be able fill technology jobs unless H1-B visa caps are raised.