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GRAHAM, FLAKE PUSH BACK ON CHANGES TO IMMIGRATION PLAN

By Kristina Peterson
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WASHINGTON—Two Republicans who helped craft a plan to overhaul the immigration system resisted major changes to their bill offered by a GOP colleague as the Senate Judiciary Committee considered the legislation on Tuesday.

GOP Sens. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Jeff Flake of Arizona, both members of the “Gang of Eight” who drafted the Senate immigration bill, joined Democrats on the committee Tuesday to defeat two amendments offered by Sen. Jeff Sessions (R., Ala.), one of the legislation’s most vocal critics.

Mr. Sessions offered two measures that would have significantly changed the proposed bill. One would have required the government to establish a “biometric” system that would use more sophisticated technology to track individuals’ entrance into and exit from the country before immigrants could apply for legal provisional status. Sen. Charles Schumer of New York, one of the Democrats who helped write the immigration bill, said the group had considered the idea but found it too expensive to implement quickly.

Mr. Sessions also met widespread opposition from both Republicans and Democrats to his amendment that would limit the total number of legal immigrants permitted to enter the country each year to 1.2 million.

“I don’t want to be a negative person here, but I do not think we are considering sufficiently what the right amount of immigration is for America,” Mr. Sessions said, worrying that a large influx of new workers could drive down wages.

But Mr. Graham countered his concerns, arguing that the upcoming retirement of baby-boomers would generate the need for a larger labor market.

“I see America’s need for legal immigration growing, not lessening,” Mr. Graham said.

Sen. Ted Cruz (R., Texas) joined the plan’s drafters, saying that he supported more legal immigration, so long as border security was strengthened.

The failure of his two amendments did little to deter Mr. Sessions, who expressed his concerns — at length. The GOP senator resisted entreaties from the panel’s chairman, Sen. Patrick Leahy (D., Vt.) to keep his arguments concise, after Mr. Sessions wrapped up a long discussion of the biometric system and moved to his next amendment.

“This is the one I want to talk the most on,” Mr. Sessions explained. “The last one was the second to most.” Several minutes later, Mr. Leahy inquired how long Mr. Sessions planned to continue his speech.

“It won’t take long,” Mr. Sessions assured him.

“What’s your definition of long?” asked a wary Mr. Leahy.

Mr. Sessions was the sole supporter for the amendment to limit legal immigration on the 18-lawmaker committee.