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BROAD IMMIGRATION OVERHAUL HEADS TO SENATE

By Kristina Peterson
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WASHINGTON—The Senate Judiciary Committee passed a sweeping reworking of immigration laws on Tuesday evening, giving a bipartisan bill its first formal stamp of approval in Congress.

After five days reviewing the more than 800 pages of the bill and accepting 100-plus amendments, the committee voted 13-5 to send the legislation to the full Senate, which is expected to take it up in early June.

The bill would provide new resources and goals for tightening border security and would require all employers to use a federal database to check the legal status of employees. It sets out a path for millions of people now in the country illegally to become permanent legal residents and eventually citizens, and it sets new annual caps and rules for visas awarded to high-skill and low-skill temporary workers.

Three Republican lawmakers joined 10 Democrats to pass the bill in committee Tuesday evening. They included two Republicans who were part of the bipartisan group of eight senators who wrote the initial draft, Jeff Flake of Arizona and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina.

Five Republicans opposed the bill, though many said they would continue working to alter the legislation when it comes to the Senate floor.

Spectators still packing the committee room at 8 p.m. broke into loud applause and cheers in both English and Spanish moments after the vote concluded. Supporters expressed optimism that the bill offered the best opportunity in years to overhaul the immigration system.

"So far at each step of the road where it's been difficult, we've been able to overcome," Sen. Charles Schumer (D., N.Y.), one of the bill's drafters, said after the vote. "That shows the importance of the bill and the momentum we have."

President Barack Obama praised the committee for passing the immigration bill, saying in a written statement that it is "largely consistent with the principles of common-sense reform I have proposed and meets the challenge of fixing our broken immigration system."

In the wake of their defeats in the 2012 presidential election, many Republicans have expressed a new willingness to rewrite immigration laws as part of an effort to appeal to Hispanic voters. But some oppose the bill for offering a path to citizenship for many of the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants currently living in the U.S.

"The path to citizenship is unfair to people who have followed the rules," said Sen. Ted Cruz (R., Texas), who opposed the bill, along with GOP Sens. Charles Grassley of Iowa, John Cornyn of Texas, Jeff Sessions of Alabama and Mike Lee of Utah.

A series of compromises in the committee paved the way for Tuesday's vote. Earlier in the day, Mr. Schumer (D., N.Y.) reached an agreement with Sen. Orrin Hatch (R., Utah) that is expected to make it easier for many companies to hire high-skilled foreign workers. Mr. Hatch voted for the bill in committee but said his support for the final bill hinged on approval of several other of his amendments the committee did not consider.

Shortly before the final vote, the panel's chairman, Sen. Patrick Leahy (D., Vt.) reluctantly opted not to demand a vote on his amendment extending immigration rights to same-sex couples, bowing to bipartisan concern that including that provision would sink the bill.

"This is the wrong moment; this is the wrong bill," said Sen. Richard Durbin (D., Ill.), who helped write the immigration bill. "There will be another day, and many of us will be by your side."

Gay-rights groups expressed disappointment that supporters of same-sex marriage didn't force opponents to vote on an issue they said has growing public approval.