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SENATE BIPARTISANSHIP ON DISPLAY, BRIEFLY, AS COMMITTEE FOCUSES ON BORDER SECURITY

By Ashley Parker
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WASHINGTON — As the Senate Judiciary Committee began plowing through more than 300 amendments intended to reshape — and, in some cases, derail — legislation to overhaul the nation’s immigration laws, signs of bipartisanship emerged Thursday, with the committee accepting at least eight Republican proposals to strengthen border security.

Four of the bill’s authors — Senators Richard J. Durbin of Illinois, the No. 2 Senate Democrat, and Charles E. Schumer, Democrat of New York, along with Senators Jeff Flake of Arizona and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, both Republicans — sit on the committee and had previously indicated that they would band together to vote against any amendments they saw as undermining the core of the bill. The legislation offers a path to citizenship for the 11 million undocumented immigrants already in the country, and implements stricter border security measures.

At the same time, members of the bipartisan group — as well as Democrats on the committee — were eager to demonstrate that they were operating with an open mind and a willingness to accept Republican suggestions to improve security at the border. By Thursday afternoon, they were pointing to the eight approved Republican measures as a sign they had done just that, hoping to increase Republican backing for the bill.

One amendment by Senator Charles E. Grassley of Iowa, the ranking Republican on the committee, was approved with a voice vote and would require continuous surveillance of 100 percent of the United States border and 90 percent effectiveness of enforcement of the entire border. In the original bill, the 90 percent effectiveness rate applies only to high-risk sectors of the border.

If border officials have not reached the surveillance and enforcement goals after five years, the bill creates a border commission to advise the Department of Homeland Security on how to reach its goals. Mr. Grassley’s amendment makes it more likely that the commission would need to be established.

“We are going to make sure that we have border security first,” Mr. Grassley said. “The legislation doesn’t do it.”

But the bipartisan coalition also held firm and defeated an amendment by Mr. Grassley that would have required the Homeland Security secretary to certify that the southern border was secure for six months before any undocumented immigrants could receive legal status.

Democrats on the committee felt that Mr. Grassley’s measure had the potential to endlessly delay citizenship to the undocumented immigrants already in the country, and Mr. Flake and Mr. Graham — the Republican members of the bipartisan group who also sit on the committee — joined with the Democrats in voting it down, 12 to 6.

"This is our chance, in this hearing room, to write an immigration bill for the 21st century, for America and its future," Mr. Durbin said.

Despite the generally congenial tone and the roughly two-dozen amendments, from both Democrats and Republicans, that ultimately passed, tempers were running high by the end of the day. Senator Ted Cruz, Republican of Texas, argued that, "The committee has voted down every serious border security amendment that has been presented here today."

When Mr. Schumer said that Mr. Cruz simply did not want to accept any path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants already in the country — something Mr. Cruz has said, and has even filed an amendment to that end — Senator John Cornyn, Republican of Texas, accused Mr. Schumer of "impugning people's motives."

"There's big holes in the underlying bill and we're trying to plug them," Mr. Cornyn said. "We're actually trying to be helpful."

Thursday's sessions came as the American Conservative Union released a letter signed by more than two-dozen prominent conservatives throwing their support behind an overhaul of the nation's immigration laws.

"Conservatives are ready to support immigration reform, so long as it is pro-economic growth, strengthens families, fosters assimilation and prevents another wave of illegal immigration from happening again," the letter read.

Senator Patrick J. Leahy, the Vermont Democrat who leads the committee, has made plans for a marathon markup, as the process of considering amendments to legislation is known, that he said would likely last all month. In a move intended to head off criticism from opponents that the process is too rushed and not fully transparent, Mr. Leahy decided to make all the amendments available to the public by posting them on the committee's Web site on Tuesday night.

Politically delicate amendments remain on both the Democratic and Republican sides, including two by Mr. Leahy that would allow United States citizens to seek a permanent resident visa, known as a green card, for a same-sex foreign partner — something they cannot do now.

Asked about Mr. Leahy's amendments, which Republicans in the bipartisan group have said would doom the legislation, Mr. Schumer said he was nervous.

"This one is something, you know, I worry about all the time, even — I'm a good sleeper, but I wake up in the morning thinking of these things, sometimes early in the morning," he said. "And so how we resolve this remains to be seen."