

WALL STREET JOURNAL

IMMIGRATION SECURITY PUSH CHAFES BORDER LAWMAKERS

By Kristina Peterson

July 14, 2013

WASHINGTON—Efforts in Congress to beef up border security are drawing criticism from a group with an ear close to the ground: the lawmakers who represent House districts along the border with Mexico.

The Senate recently included what many called a "border surge" of new federal agents, fencing and other measures as part of an immigration-law overhaul it passed, and the House is expected to call for additional security provisions. Those measures show that the border discussion has taken a wrong turn, say some of the eight House Democrats who, along with one Republican, represent communities on the nearly 2,000-mile Southern border.

These lawmakers, whose districts tilt more Democratic and Hispanic than many others in border states, worry that a crackdown, and the tone of debate surrounding it, will alienate Mexico, one of the country's most important trading partners. They argue that instead of pumping billions of dollars into efforts that they say would militarize the border, the government could divert some of that money to make legal crossings easier and cut down on delays at land crossings, which they say create a drag on the economy.

"All other arguments about defense aside, just the symbolic nature of constructing more fence along the border of a country with whom we have such great business relationships doesn't make any sense," said Rep. Filemon Vela, one of five Democrats to represent the Texas border with Mexico.

Most House Republicans argue that tighter border enforcement is necessary to halt the flow of illegal immigrants before lawmakers can consider a pathway to citizenship to people already in the U.S. illegally.

Rep. Henry Cuellar (D., Texas) said he recently returned from a three-day trip to Mexico, where lawmakers and business officials were astounded by the tone of the border debate. "The first thing they said was, 'What are you all up to there in the United States? What are you trying to do to us?'" he said.

The border-security provisions of the Senate bill have caused tensions among Democrats in the House. Earlier this month, Mr. Vela resigned from the Congressional Hispanic Caucus in protest of its support for the Senate bill.

"The Senate bill perpetuates an environment of fear and separation," Mr. Vela wrote in the Houston Chronicle.

The sole Republican to represent a border district also has concerns. Adding more fencing "just doesn't work," said Rep. Steve Pearce of New Mexico. However, strengthening border security through other methods, including more sophisticated technology, is popular at home, said Mr. Pearce, whose district is more than half Hispanic.

"Pretty much everybody in our district would like to see [more] border security—Hispanics and non-Hispanics alike," he said in an interview.

The "border surge" amendment added to the Senate bill to generate more GOP support would double the number of Border Patrol agents to nearly 40,000 and require 700 miles of fencing to be completed, among other measures. The Congressional Budget Office said those provisions would cost about \$40 billion over 10 years.

House Republicans made clear last week that their first step in passing any roster of immigration bills would begin with attempts to reduce illegal immigration at the border. Many say the Senate measure doesn't do enough to tighten the flow of immigrants, with some on Capitol Hill citing continued illegal immigration after a 1986 law that legalized many immigrants and included measures to stop illegal crossings. "The question is can we actually get the border secure and not have this happen again?" Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.) said on NBC Sunday. "We need to seriously beef up the border security part."

Several House Republicans are focusing on curtailing illegal immigration by giving state and local authorities new powers to enforce federal immigration laws. States have certain, limited powers to enforce federal immigration law, but courts have voided some of their efforts.

Expanding the scope of state powers would help enforce the law, some lawmakers say. More fencing alone won't, for example, help winnow the number of people remaining illegally in the U.S. after overstaying their visas, said Rep. Trey Gowdy (R., S.C.), a member of the House Judiciary Committee.

Mr. Gowdy, a former federal prosecutor, said he was sensitive to concerns that some might perceive officers' actions as racial profiling.

"I have seen the destructiveness when any constituency does not trust law enforcement," he told Bloomberg on Friday. But Mr. Gowdy didn't see that concern as a reason to cordon off immigration enforcement from local authorities. "We trust state and local law enforcement with every other category of crime," he said.

Border-district Democrats have stepped up efforts to shift the focus of the immigration debate to the economic impacts of actions along the border. "We have to dispel this myth that the border is primarily a threat," said Rep. Beto O'Rourke (D., Texas), whose office dispatched to every House lawmaker an analysis of how U.S.-Mexico trade affects all U.S. states.

Spending money to speed legal crossings at border entry-points would help commerce and boost the flow of people trying to enter the U.S. to shop, said Rep. Ron Barber (D., Ariz.). He said entrance points on the Arizona border can have waits of nearly three hours.

"We have to do better than that," said Mr. Barber, who has invited a bipartisan group of lawmakers to come visit part of his 84-mile stretch of Arizona border next month.