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IMMIGRATION-OVERHAUL BACKERS PRESS CONSERVATIVE GROUPS FOR HELP

By Laura Meckler
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The August recess offers a critical opportunity for conservative groups backing a Senate-style immigration overhaul to sway skeptical House Republicans as they return home.

It isn't clear that advocates are ready to seize it. Republicans for Immigration Reform, a group formed to back the effort, has struggled to raise money. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has barely opened its wallet for ads. And there has been little effort to coordinate strategy among the array of business, religious and political groups that favor the legislation.

The situation prompted the authors of the immigration bill passed by the Senate last month to call in business groups and other advocates for a dressing-down on Tuesday. Sen. John McCain (R., Ariz.) and six other senators urged them to work harder and more closely together to push the reluctant House to act.

Each group has a stake in the legislation. The business groups want better access to immigrant labor, and some GOP political groups think the bill would help attract Hispanic voters. One aide said senators told the advocates: "You guys pushed and pushed us to get a bill done" in the Senate, "and you're not doing enough to pressure the House to follow suit. Get moving."

Sen. Charles Schumer (D., N.Y.) went so far as to pass out a list of 125 House Republicans who he said were potential "yes" votes and directed the groups to work together to make sure all those members are lobbied. He asked them to report back to him in about a week.

"We just want to give them a timetable and rev it up," Mr. Schumer said in an interview.

Some advocates agree they need to better coordinate their efforts to persuade enough House Republicans to support a package that includes a path to citizenship for the 11 million people here illegally, as well as a bigger flow of guest workers, more border security, employment verification and other measures.

"I think there is a consensus that there needs to be more of a steering committee or war room that helps to coordinate projects," said Grover Norquist, president of Americans for Tax Reform, who was at Tuesday's meeting with senators. "It's making sure that you're talking to 100 different people and not 20 people five times."

Republicans for Immigration Reform was formed by Bush administration Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez and others to support Republicans who fear a challenge from the political right if they back an immigration overhaul. But Charlie Spies, who helps run the group, said it has struggled to raise money. Mr. Spies cited "donor fatigue" following an intense election year, among other things.

He said that people were supportive of their goals, but when asked for money, "they say, 'Well, we want to wait and see what happens with progress in the House.' "

At Tuesday's meeting, Sen. McCain singled out business groups, saying House members need to hear from the Chamber of Commerce and businesses in their districts, a McCain aide said.

"He's been frustrated that he hasn't seen more activity, particularly from the business community. That which he has seen he hasn't been very impressed by," the aide said.

Immigration legislation faces a tough path in the House, with many Republicans there opposed to Senate provisions that grant green cards and the prospect of citizenship to many illegal immigrants. Some also oppose an increase in guest workers, saying they would undermine the U.S. workforce.

Those views will be presented, too, to lawmakers during the August recess. "We are certainly encouraging people to go out there and approach members of Congress," said Ira Mehlman, spokesman for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which opposes the Senate bill.

Several groups backing the Senate bill plan meetings with House members next month. The American Farm Bureau says it will coordinate farm visits for members of Congress. Americans for a Conservative Direction, the Republican branch of a lobbying group backed by Facebook Chief Executive Mark Zuckerberg, plans to direct supporters to congressional town hall meetings, where they can urge lawmakers to support the legislation.

The American Action Network, another GOP group, spent more than \$750,000 during the Senate debate on ads. Last week, the group aired its first ad aimed at the House, a \$100,000 buy.

A spokeswoman for the Chamber of Commerce, Blair Latoff Holmes, said the group would be active in August, and that Chamber officials are meeting with House members. She declined to offer specifics.

Ad trackers at Campaign Media Analysis Group found that the Chamber's sole advertisement on immigration ran just 11 times on national cable, at a likely cost of less than \$50,000. The Chamber spent \$8.5 million during the 2009-2010 health-care debate and more than \$30 million on the 2012 elections.

The Chamber says its immigration ad also ran on local cable TV, which isn't picked up by ad trackers. Still, it appears the buy was far less than the \$1 million initially discussed by the Chamber. Ms. Holmes said the buy was scaled back because the bill passed before most ads were set to run.

Chamber officials say they are fully committed to the issue. During the Senate debate, the Chamber helped push the bill forward by striking an agreement with unions on the structure of a guest-worker program for low-skilled immigrants.

"Let's allow the House to work its business," Tom Donohue, president of the Chamber, said last week. "We want to give them time to hear from the constituents. We are going to be out encouraging these constituents to talk to them."