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FOCUS OF IMMIGRATION DEBATE SHIFTS TO HOUSE

By Sara Murray
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After four years of on-and-off negotiations, a bipartisan group in the House has crafted more than 500 pages of new immigration legislation.

But whether that measure sees the light of day—and whether it gains any momentum—is an open question.

More than a week after the Senate passed its own sweeping bill, House Republicans will gather Wednesday to debate their approach to an immigration overhaul. Many are resisting the idea of passing a comprehensive measure similar to the Senate's. Instead, some House leaders and rank-and-file Republicans are advocating a piecemeal approach, biting off individual elements of the immigration equation and passing narrow deals.

That raises a question of whether the bipartisan House group's version of a comprehensive bill will be unveiled, at least any time soon.

"It's more important to get it right than to get it done by a particular deadline," said Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D., Calif.), a member of the bipartisan group. "There is time for this product to be part of the process."

Speaker John Boehner (R., Ohio) has said the House won't simply take up the Senate bill, and House Judiciary Chairman Bob Goodlatte (R., Va.), a key player in any measure, is openly arguing for the piecemeal approach. "There's definitely a lot of concern, not just in the House of Representatives but across the country, about massive pieces of legislation," Mr. Goodlatte said.

Democrats who hope to force Republicans into taking up the comprehensive Senate bill won't be pleased with the outcome, Mr. Goodlatte said. "That's a very high-risk strategy because it could result in killing immigration reform altogether," he said in an interview.

Neither Messrs. Goodlatte nor Boehner has pledged to take up the House group's bill even if it produces one. Still, the lawmakers continue to meet. Over time, the group has shrunk from roughly 20 lawmakers to seven, with Rep. Raúl Labrador (R., Idaho) being the most recent to walk away from negotiations.

They take turns bringing dinner—barbecue, Thai and Italian—which seems to make everyone less grumpy during evening meetings, one aide said. And members say they are closing in on a deal.

"The members are in the process of going through word by word, line by line to assure ourselves that it matches up with the agreements that we made," Ms. Lofgren said of the draft legislation. "It's a tedious process, but it's a necessary process."

The House group has been tight-lipped about the substance of its agreement. Like the Senate bill, it is expected to offer a path to citizenship for millions of immigrants in the U.S. illegally. But the path would be slower, taking 15 years instead of 13 in the Senate plan.

And while the Senate bill includes new work-visa programs, crafted with the help of business groups and unions, the House group isn't expected to address all of those issues.

After a number of blown deadlines, the group has mostly stopped making predictions about when it will release a bill. "I think we hopefully will have a viable option," said Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart (R., Fla.).

For a while, the gang appeared to be on the verge of collapse on a near-weekly basis. In mid-May, tensions ran high as members of the group gathered to hash out the issue of health coverage for the millions of immigrants in the U.S. illegally.

Rep. John Carter (R., Texas) was growing frustrated with the state of the talks. He went into the meeting prepared to walk away from the group, according to people familiar with the meeting. The press waited outside.

As Mr. Carter tossed out a possible solution, Ms. Lofgren—a sort of den mother who often runs the meetings—whipped out her iPad Mini and started tapping away on a compromise.

Republicans and Democrats split up to discuss the new proposals, and before long, there was, as members would call it, an "agreement in principle." All were on board except for Rep. Xavier Becerra (D., Calif.).

Mr. Becerra is part of the Democratic House leadership, and other members were suspicious that Democratic leaders were trying to slow-walk the House process to avoid interfering with the Senate's efforts.

In one meeting, things grew so tense that Rep. Luis Gutierrez (D., Ill.), looking to have a frank talk, kicked all of the staffers out of the room, according to people familiar with the meeting.

Mr. Becerra declined to comment, though he has previously pledged that Democratic leaders want to see an immigration deal.

Other members now believe they have a tentative deal on immigrant health and that Mr. Becerra is on board. Mr. Labrador, on the other hand, says the health dispute was the "last straw" convincing him to leave the group.