

VISAS COULD AID GRADUATES

By Laura Meckler
October 22, 2011

Momentum is building in Congress toward offering expedited green cards to people with advanced scientific degrees, addressing complaints from companies that say the U.S. is training highly skilled workers only to lose them to other countries.

Rep. Lamar Smith (R., Texas), chairman of the House immigration subcommittee, said he plans to introduce legislation providing up to 10,000 visas a year to foreign students graduating from U.S. universities with doctorates in engineering, information technology and the natural sciences.

Many Democrats, including President Barack Obama, support increasing the number of visas for workers with advanced training in those fields. But efforts to address the issue have stalled amid a larger dispute between the two parties over whether to provide a path to citizenship for people already in the country illegally, which Democrats favor.

Those issues could still stall Mr. Smith's legislation, but lawmakers in both parties seem willing to talk about finding a way forward. Mr. Smith plans to meet with his Senate counterpart, Sen. Charles Schumer (D., N.Y.), to discuss his legislation in early November, a Schumer aide said.

In May, the White House said the U.S. should be "stapling a green card" to the diploma of every science, technology, engineering and math Ph.D. graduate and to select masters' graduates, so that they can "contribute to the American economy and become Americans over time." But that was in the context of a broader White House immigration plan that included citizenship opportunities for some illegal immigrants, an effort that collapsed amid strong Republican opposition.

In its wake, the high-tech community began pushing for stand-alone legislation.

The U.S. currently offers about 120,000 employment visas to professionals in various fields, including science, engineering and information technology. Many highly trained workers, particularly those from China and India, face long waits for green cards and sometimes choose to work elsewhere.

Mr. Smith's legislation, which he said he would introduce in a few weeks, would not increase the overall level of legal immigration. Instead, congressional aides said, he plans to divert visas from programs such as the "diversity lottery," which lets people from under-represented countries compete for visas.

The diversity lottery offers 55,000 immigrant visas per year. A House committee has voted to kill the program.

In an interview, Mr. Smith said students who would get visas under his bill "really are going to contribute a great deal to our country and to the economy, as well."

He said he would limit eligibility to those with doctorates from U.S. research universities, though others think the visas should be available to those with masters' degrees, too. To qualify, students would need to have job offers, and Mr. Smith said they should commit to staying in the country for at least five years.

"I want us to get the most bang we can for the visa," Mr. Smith said.

In another signal of momentum, another Republican, Rep. Raul Labrador of Idaho, introduced a similar bill this month. His bill took sections from legislation offered in June by the top Democrat on the immigration subcommittee, Rep. Zoe Lofgren of California, who represents Silicon Valley.

Ms. Lofgren added provisions to win support from the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, including one that would allow students who were in the country illegally during high school to qualify for foreign student visas if they are pursuing science or technology degrees.

Mr. Smith considers that to be akin to "amnesty" and says he will not support it. But Ms. Lofgren says any bill will have to be "balanced" to make it through Congress.

Without Ms. Lofgren's provision, or something similar, Hispanic lawmakers are likely to oppose the bill, partly because they believe they will find it harder to push their cause later.

Rep. Charles Gonzalez (D., Texas), chairman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, said of Mr. Smith's approach: "It's incomplete, inadequate and, in my opinion, unfair." He said students brought to the U.S. as children should be eligible for help.

The White House had no comment on the Smith legislation. In a statement, Mr. Schumer said the bill that Mr. Smith had in mind could not pass the Senate without changes, but he also signaled interest in working with Mr. Smith on the matter.