

Senators say 'breakthrough' on immigration plan near

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By John Hall

Texas Baptist Communications

WASHINGTON—The U.S. Senate April 6 voted down a plan for immigration reform 60-39, but soon after announced a “huge breakthrough” in gaining bipartisan support for a reform plan that would enable undocumented immigrants eventually to become citizens.

The vote and announcement came a day after it seemingly became clear that a bipartisan bill to reform immigration did not have the needed 60 votes to pass.

According to the Associated Press, Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tennessee and Minority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nevada, agreed this new plan was a breakthrough in the negotiations, but Reid cautioned against too much enthusiasm until the bill was passed.

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Suzii Paynter, interim director of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission, is encouraged to see leaders across party lines coming together on this issue. Lawmakers seem to have worked out their differences and come to a reasonable compromise, she asserted.

With President Bush supporting it, the immigration issue is less likely to fade quietly into the background, said Paynter, whose group called for “comprehensive immigration reform” at an April 5 news conference on Capitol Hill.

The new plan enhances border security, regulates the number of immigrants into the United States and provides an avenue for illegal immigrants to become citizens. The plan separates undocumented workers into three categories.

Aliens who have been in the country longer than five years can become citizens by taking several tests, paying fines and back taxes and submitting to a background check.

Undocumented people who have lived in the United States longer than two years but less than five years must first go to a border point of entry, leave the country briefly and be readmitted to the United States. Then they must go through the same series of requirements the first group must to become citizens.

Illegal immigrants who have been in the United States less than two years must leave the country and go through the same process other foreigners must to enter the country.

Republican leaders, including Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, repeatedly said senators were not given adequate opportunity to offer amendments or debate a judiciary committee plan that would have allowed illegal immigrants to apply for temporary work visas and enabled guest workers to become citizens after 11 years in the country.

Lawmakers were trying to “jam” the bill through the senate, Cornyn said. “This is not the senate working according to its finest traditions.” He also has voiced dissatisfaction with the latest proposed bill.

But lawmakers from both parties agreed immigration reform is an important issue that must continue to be discussed. They spoke of a need to address the need for border security, a practical enforcement of immigration laws and the creation of an avenue for undocumented residents to become citizens.

“No matter how this cloture vote goes ... we need to continue to work on this issue because it is so important to the future of our country,” said Sen. Ken Salazar, D-Colorado.

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