

Senators agree to revive immigration bill

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Associated Press
May. 11, 2006

WASHINGTON - Senate leaders reached a deal Thursday on reviving a broad immigration bill that could provide millions of illegal immigrants a chance to become American citizens and said they'll try to pass it before Memorial Day.

The agreement brokered by Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., and Minority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., breaks a political stalemate that has lingered for weeks while immigrants and their supporters held rallies, boycotts and protests to push for action.

"We congratulate the Senate on reaching agreement and we look forward to passage of a bill prior to Memorial Day," said Dana Perino, deputy White House press secretary.

Key to the agreement is who will be negotiating a compromise with the House, which last December passed an enforcement-only bill that would subject the estimated 11 million to 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States to felony charges as well as deportation.

Frist said the Senate will send 14 Republicans and 12 Democrats to negotiate with the House, with seven of the Republicans and five Democrats coming from the Judiciary Committee. The remaining seven Republicans will be chosen by Frist and remaining seven Democrats chosen by Reid.

At least one opponent of the compromise measure, Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, will be among the remaining seven Republicans appointed to the committee, spokesman Don Stewart said.

Frist said a "considerable" number of amendments would be debated when the Senate begins debating the bill early next week.

It would be the most comprehensive rewrite of immigration laws since the so-called Simpson-Mazzoli bill some 20 years ago.

Reid acknowledged on the Senate floor Thursday morning that he "didn't get everything that I wanted" in the agreement, but said Frist didn't either. Reaching the agreement is "not easy with the political atmosphere," Reid said.

Reid had been taking some criticism for refusing to move forward on the bill after complaining that Republicans were trying to undermine it with amendments and insisting that Democrats be allowed to have a say in who serves on the conference committee.

Republicans, too, have had opposition from conservatives to the compromise proposal. These critics consider its path to citizenship provision for illegal immigrants and hundreds of thousands of future guest workers to be tantamount to "amnesty."

They've also had to contend with fallout from opposition to the House bill that triggered nationwide protests that drew hundreds of thousands in Los Angeles, Chicago and Dallas and hundreds more in other cities and small communities.

Presidential and midyear politics have been a subtext to the immigration debate. Frist and Arizona Sen. John McCain, one of the architects of the legalization proposal, are prominent in speculation for the 2008 GOP presidential nomination.

The compromise bill the Senate will consider builds on legislation approved by the Senate Judiciary Committee 12-6, with four Republicans voting with Democrats to approve the measure.

That measure absorbed a bill drafted by McCain and Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., that called for allowing illegal immigrants to work toward becoming legal permanent residents.

President Bush had helped accelerate progress on the bill after meeting with a bipartisan group of senators last month and stating clearer support for allowing illegal immigrants a path to citizenship.

"Business and labor, Democrats and Republicans, religious leaders and the American people strongly support our plan to strengthen borders, provide a path to earned citizenship for those undocumented workers who are here and put in place a realistic guest worker program for the future," Kennedy said.