

GANNETT

Sen. Rand Paul will back immigration reform bill if Senate agrees to his plan for annual vote on border security

By: James R. Carroll – June 12, 2013

Sen. Rand Paul sought Wednesday to position himself as a key vote in Senate deliberations over immigration reform, saying he would back the measure in exchange for approval of his amendment requiring an annual congressional vote certifying the U.S. border is secure.

The Kentucky Republican, who is considering a presidential bid in 2016, is considered a swing vote on immigration reform.

Paul said he plans to propose what he calls a “trust but verify” amendment to the immigration legislation now before the Senate that would make the expansion of work visas and other reforms contingent on a congressional finding each year that the border is secure. The 1986 immigration reform law promised border security that never came, he said.

“I think the way to ensure and to get people on board that are skeptical of the government doing what they promised to do is actually write it into the bill and let us vote each year on that,” Paul told reporters after addressing the Latino Partnership for Conservative Principles and the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference on Wednesday in Washington. “That would get my vote. If they passed my amendment, that would get my vote.”

Paul’s amendment also would require that a border fence with Mexico to be completed within five years and would prohibit creation of national identity cards.

The existing Senate bill appears to have the backing of nearly all the Democrats and enough Republicans now for at least 60 votes to pass without a filibuster. But many Democrats want significant additional GOP support, including from conservatives like Paul, to persuade House Republicans to also act on immigration reform.

“Senators like Rand Paul are very important to giving this bill the conservative credibility it needs to move forward in the House,” said Alex Nowrasteh, immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a Washington-based libertarian think tank.

Rep. John Yarmuth, D-3rd District, and seven other Democratic and Republican lawmakers are working on a separate proposal.

Paul told those at the forum that immigration reform is a matter of “common sense and decency,” but added “the bill’s not there yet.”

“I’m sort of in between where the Senate and the House is, but not yet ready to vote for the Senate bill unless they are willing to listen to people who say, ‘Let’s make the border secure,’ ” he said.

The senator said he does not know when he will be able to offer his amendment, one of many expected to come before the Senate in the next couple of weeks.

After border security is dealt with, Paul said, “conservatives will accept what needs to come next,” which is to provide legal status to 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States.

But rather than a path to citizenship outlined in the current bill — it would give citizenship to most of the undocumented immigrants and expand the guest-worker program — Paul said he favored what he called “a middle ground” that would establish a probationary period for those seeking legal status through expansion of work visas.

Another likely border security amendment raising concerns among Senate Democrats would contain preconditions for allowing immigrants on provisional visas to become eligible for green cards. The so-called “trigger” approach, championed by Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, would require border apprehensions to be at 90 percent and border surveillance to be at 100 percent before undocumented immigrants could get on a path to citizenship.

But Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., said Cornyn’s proposal would be a poison pill for the legislation.

President Barack Obama, campaigning in Boston for Massachusetts U.S. Senate candidate Ed Markey, said the Senate had “a good bipartisan bill ... that strengthens our borders and reforms the system so that everybody is playing by the same rules.”

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said Tuesday the Senate measure had “serious flaws” on border security and on dealing with government benefits and taxes for immigrants seeking legal status.

Likewise, Sen. Dan Coats, R-Ind., said Wednesday the bill’s border security provisions need to be changed before he could back the measure.

“We can’t just rely on trusting that the border will get fixed,” Coats said.