

CONGRESS: What's next for immigration overhaul?

By Roxana Kopetman and David Olson

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After House Speaker John Boehner's comments last week that it would be difficult to pass immigration legislation this year, some are ready to declare as dead any prospects for a nationwide overhaul in 2014. Others say it's too early to write an obituary.

"People are pronouncing immigration reform dead too soon. It's an acknowledgment of trouble — no doubt. But a far cry from saying it's dead," said Alex Nowrasteh, immigration policy analyst with the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, D.C.

On Thursday, Feb. 6, Boehner said, "It's going to be difficult to move any immigration legislation" until there are assurances that President Obama will enforce the country's laws.

"The American people, including many of my members, don't trust that the reform that we're talking about will be implemented as it was intended to be," Boehner said, one week after the Republican leadership released a set of principles to guide the debate on immigration reform.

Randon Lane, chairman of the Republican Party of Riverside County, said he is disappointed there likely won't be action on immigration reform this year. But, he said, "When you have that kind of distrust, it's hard to move forward. If we had a president and Congress with a good working relationship, and there wasn't that kind of distrust, there would be a higher expectation of getting something done."

Some advocates for immigration reform accused Boehner of playing politics with the issue.

Gilberto Esquivel, president of the Riverside chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens, called the speaker's comments a cop-out that reflected Boehner's willingness to cave in to the demands of the Tea Party faction of the GOP.

"It's a political ploy," he said. "He's gotten a lot of pressure from the Tea Party about this. The Tea Party is not going to endorse any immigration reform, period."

The Catholic Church, some evangelical denominations and other faith groups are supporting an immigration overhaul, along with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, agricultural and hotel industry leaders and other groups who argue that incorporating undocumented immigrants into the fabric of society is good for them and for the country.

Conservative Republicans and groups such as the Tea Party make several arguments: undocumented residents have broken the country's laws; authorities need to do a better enforcement job, and giving legal status or citizenship to an estimated 11 million people living in the country illegally would hurt American workers.

Karthick Ramakrishnan, an associate professor of political science at UC Riverside, said Boehner adopted a more pessimistic tone on immigration reform in part because of concerns by some in his party that pushing the issue would divide GOP elected officials and candidates.

They prefer to focus in this year's election on criticism of Obama's healthcare reform plan, which the party is united against and on which Democrats are perceived as vulnerable.

Some immigrant-rights groups remain undeterred and pledge to continue their pressure on Congress to adopt a law that will eventually lead to citizenship. The U.S. Senate passed a measure last summer that included a 13-year path to citizenship.

The U.S. House has not, although it has passed several smaller measures. The principles released last week stopped short of endorsing a path to citizenship for the nation's 11.5 million undocumented immigrants, which immigrant-rights groups and most Democrats advocate. But it backed legal status for many of them, and that drew criticism from the right.

"We will continue pushing for commonsense immigration reform because it's good for our economy, it's supported by a strong majority of voters, it's the right thing to do and we have no other choice. For millions of immigrant families, this is not about the daily politics in Congress. It is about something much bigger -- their jobs, families and ability to reach towards a better life," said Jacob Hay, spokesman for SEIU United Service Workers West.

Fernando Romero, coordinator of Justice for Immigrants Coalition of Inland Southern California, said Boehner's criticism that the president isn't enforcing immigration law was off base.

"It's very ironic to point the finger at President Obama when he's the one who has deported more people than any other president," Romero said.

The coalition, which includes the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Bernardino, immigrant-rights groups and labor unions, is one of a number of organizations that has been increasingly pushing the Obama administration to issue a moratorium on deportations. Frustration over the "very bleak" outlook for immigration reform in light of Boehner's comments will push the immigrant-rights movement to focus even more on stopping deportations, Romero predicted.

In his recent State of the Union address, Obama said he would consider taking unilateral action on various measures if Congress does not act on them, but he did not mention immigration as one of those issues.

Roy Beck, president of D.C.-based NumbersUSA, said the GOP's recent release of guidelines on immigration was sent out as a trial balloon to test the conservative base.

"It got shot out like crazy," Beck said. "Polls repeatedly show that Americans, regardless of who is president, don't want legalization even considered until enforcement is fully implemented."

When asked Friday for their reactions, Southern California members of Congress split along party lines on the speaker's comments.

Rep. Gary Miller, R-Rancho Cucamonga: "It is essential we get this legislation right, due to the importance of immigration reform for the Inland Empire. But, as the Speaker points out, this will be difficult to accomplish unless all sides set aside politics and work in good faith toward a fair and equitable solution."

Rep. Mark Takano, D-Riverside: "He's scared of maybe 30 hardcore extreme Tea Party members of his own caucus, who in turn put fear in another 60 to 70 members of that caucus because their positions have a connection to the outside spending groups that meddle in Republican primaries. So what looked like Speaker Boehner's courage and willingness to stand down this extreme element, this extreme force in Republican politics, looks like a major backtracking."

Rep. Ken Calvert, R-Corona: "I share the Speaker's concerns about the President's disregard for the rule of law. You simply cannot selectively enforce laws passed by Congress and then expect to have trust on something as complex and challenging as immigration reform."

Rep. Loretta Sanchez, D-Santa Ana, said: "Boehner has been calling immigration reform a top priority for over a year, but he has yet to bring anything to floor of the House. It is increasingly difficult to take him at his word when he continually caves to the demands of the extreme fringe of his party."

Dayne Lee, a spokesman for the Korean Center in Los Angeles and Orange County, said Boehner's latest statement is part of a political game being played in Washington.

"The political momentum is not going to go away," Lee said. "We expect he'll go back and forth again."

Matthew Fleming and David Hood of the Register's Washington Bureau, and The Associated Press and the New York Times contributed to this report.