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HEADLINE: U.S.-Panama pact may win approval

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BODY:

The pending U.S. trade agreement with Panama likely will come before Congress in about one month and be approved, a San Antonio congressman and a Washington trade expert said Thursday, but action on proposed trade pacts with South Korea and Colombia won't be so fast, if ever.

The comments came during the Free Trade Alliance San Antonio's Global Trade Policy Forum. The alliance staged the forum, attended by about 200 people, to mark its 15th anniversary.

U.S. Rep. Ciro Rodriguez, D-San Antonio, said the Obama administration will bring the U.S.-Panama trade agreement to Congress in about a month, but he said the South Korean and Colombian agreements face steep opposition in Congress.

Although Rodriguez said at one point that the three pending trade pacts, all negotiated when George W. Bush was president, could be beneficial, he declined to say, when later questioned, whether he would vote in favor of any of them. He said he wanted to study them when they come to Congress for an up-or-down vote.

"Panama should pass this year. Numerous U.S. companies stand to benefit as Panama widens its canal," said Dan Griswold, director of the CATO Institute Center for Trade Policy Studies in Washington.

Griswold also said the South Korean and Colombian pacts could not be approved now. "Union opposition is strong, for mistaken reasons," Griswold said.

Rodriguez said politics regarding the war on drugs in the 1900s still harm prospects for the Colombian trade pact. The South Korean trade agreement is hindered because of South Korea's troubled relationship with North Korea and questions about the openness of South Korea's domestic auto market, he said.

U.S. Rep. Charles Gonzalez, D-San Antonio, said the Obama administration wants to restore the U.S.-Mexico cross-border trucking test program killed earlier this year by Congress. Gonzalez said there may be more votes for a new test program. But he did not predict a new program would win approval. "Politically, it's a loser," he said.

Alliance leaders closed the forum by awarding \$3,000 in scholarships to high school students studying international trade.

On Thursday night, the alliance further celebrated its anniversary with a gala dinner honoring its founders. The dinner at the Crowne Plaza Hotel downtown was attended by about 300 people.

Recognized were Nelson Wolff, Tom Frost, Joe Krier and Leo Gomez. Wolff, now Bexar County judge, was San Antonio mayor in 1994 when he led the effort to transform the former World Trade Association of San Antonio into the Free Trade Alliance San Antonio, with broader roles and financial support.

Retired banker Frost chaired the alliance's first board of directors. Krier, former president of the Greater San Antonio Chamber of Commerce, and Gomez, ex-president of the San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, invested as founding alliance sponsors.

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