

Immigration debate could open with reintroduction of bill

WASHINGTON - As the Senate prepared to open two weeks of debate on immigration reform legislation in mid-May despite lacking a bill around which to shape the discussion, Catholic and other immigration advocates were troubled by some of the proposals they had heard.

After no viable bill seemed to be on the horizon despite months of behind-the-scenes negotiation among Senate Democrats, Republicans and the White House, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., said May 11 that he was prepared to reintroduce a bill approved by the Senate last year as a starting point. That bill died at the close of the 109th Congress in December after negotiators failed to reconcile it with a vastly different immigration bill approved by the House.

Kevin Appleby, director of migration and refugee policy for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said he is particularly troubled by proposals he has seen for a new immigration bill that would change the basis for preference in immigration from reuniting family members to favoring employment-based visa applications.

On May 11 Reid also announced a delay - to at least May 16 - of the opening of floor consideration, to give negotiators more time to craft a bill with enough support from both sides to allow legislation to move forward for debate.

Although there are various immigration bills on the table, strategists have been trying to craft a version they believe has a chance of passage before bringing it to the floor for debate.

Meanwhile, organizations pushing for a comprehensive immigration bill were urging the public to contact their senators asking for support of broad legislation.

Appleby said the "bottom line" elements that the USCCB wants to see in legislation include: a viable system for legalizing some of the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants in the country; a program for temporary workers that protects the rights of employees and includes a realistic process for the workers to apply to stay in the

United States; and preservation of the current family-based priority system for legal immigration.

In a May 11 teleconference with representatives of some of the largest organizations in a coalition that includes the USCCB, Frank Sharry, director of the National Immigration Forum, said some of the proposals being considered are “deeply troubling” and don’t meet “the standards of workability.”

Sharry said that among the possible components of a bill that he considers nonstarters are proposals that would cut the number of visas allotted to family immigration; create a point system for visas that is weighted to favor highly skilled workers and disfavor family immigration; and reduce the already inadequate number of slots for new green cards for low-skilled workers.

He said the demands of the U.S. economy create a market for both highly skilled and low-skilled immigrant workers, yet the point system for visas that was being proposed by the White House favored only highly educated workers.

Cecilia Munoz, vice president of the National Council of La Raza, said one of the issues holding up negotiation of a viable bill is the move to restructure the whole legal immigration system, which has not been part of discussions and negotiations about immigration laws for more than a decade.

Appleby said the bishops’ conference is “cautiously optimistic” that a workable bill can be negotiated but added that it needs to happen quickly.

“We need to get something before the American public and out of the backrooms,” he said.

Appleby said if Congress continues to dither about a broad-spectrum approach to the nation’s immigration-related problems, “they are really at risk of ceding this issue to state and local governments.”

The day after the teleconference, voters in the Dallas suburb of Farmers Branch approved a law prohibiting landlords from renting to most illegal immigrants. City councils in dozens of other cities have passed similar measures.

On the other side of Capitol Hill, House leaders have said they would put

immigration legislation to a vote before their August recess. The House Judiciary subcommittee dealing with immigration continues to hold hearings on various aspects of immigration law, often at the rate of two hearings a week.

A House bill called the Security Through Regularized Immigration and a Vibrant Economy Act, or STRIVE Act, has received halting support from the USCCB and other members of the coalition as “a step in the right direction,” albeit with aspects the groups would like to see changed.