

House Republicans Schedule Immigration Hearings in Border States

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Body

House Republicans announced on Thursday a series of summer **hearings** on **immigration** policy to be held in California, Arizona and Texas and challenged the view that the sessions were intended to delay new **immigration** legislation.

"We can send an **immigration** bill to the president this year," Speaker J. Dennis Hastert declared at a news conference and surrounded by his fellow leaders and chairmen of the committees that will hold the **hearings**. But Mr. Hastert, **Republican** of Illinois, said the **House** would not be hurried.

"We want to make sure that the Congress gets this done the right way and not to be rushed just because it's an election year," he said.

Sessions are planned in San Diego and Laredo, Tex., on July 5 and July 7, respectively, on **border** vulnerabilities and international terrorism; **hearings** on English as the official language and enforcement of current **immigration** laws are planned for mid-July; and **hearings** are planned in Arizona in mid-August on costs to the government resulting from gaps in **border** control.

The Armed Services Committee also plans a **hearing** in Yuma, Ariz., on the role of the National Guard at the **border**, and additional **hearings** are likely to be **scheduled** on a variety of other issues.

House Republicans said the meetings would provide a needed forum for Americans to offer their views on contending with illegal **immigration** as well as provide a chance to explore a measure passed by the Senate that **House Republicans** oppose for numerous reasons, including the opportunity it provides for illegal immigrants to gain citizenship.

Some **Republicans** and Democrats said the **hearings** were a ruse to stall negotiations with the Senate until after the election while giving **Republicans** a way to attack the Senate bill and rally election support.

Representative Nancy Pelosi of California, the Democratic leader, said her party would have something to say, as well. "What Democrats will do is go around the country, wherever the **Republicans** want to go, and say the American people want some answers," Ms. Pelosi told reporters on Thursday. "Why haven't you protected the **border**? Why haven't you protected American workers?"

In a countermove, the Senate Judiciary Committee is planning its own **hearings**, beginning with one July 5 in Pennsylvania. Senator Arlen Specter, the Pennsylvania **Republican** who is chairman of the panel, said he would examine such issues as the need for a guest worker program and how to contend with millions of illegal aliens already in the nation.

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Senator Bill Frist, the majority leader, said he backed the House move. "Hearings, done right, will do much to knit together a common understanding of the challenges we face and the choices we must make to write an immigration reform law of which the Congress and the country can rightly be proud," Mr. Frist said.

The dueling hearings set the stage for a summer of political clashes over immigration heading toward the November elections and could provide a stage for activism by those on both sides of the issue.

While lawmakers moved ahead with their plans, the White House continued to press lawmakers to try to strike a deal on final legislation in September, after the hearings. And interest groups backing the Senate's approach, which has been generally endorsed by President Bush, released a poll on Thursday by the Tarrance Group that found 72 percent of likely Republican voters considered it important that Congress take action on immigration legislation this year.

House Republican leaders insisted on Thursday that their objective was to produce a final bill, but they said that it must emphasize border enforcement, new criminal penalties for illegal immigrants and sanctions on employers who hire them before Congress moves ahead with the subjects of temporary guest workers or potential citizenship.

"Unless we enforce our laws, the door will slowly close shut to immigrants," said Representative F. James Sensenbrenner Jr., Republican of Wisconsin and chairman of the Judiciary Committee. "There has to be a differentiation between the legal immigrants, which we have welcomed in the past and should continue to welcome, those who obey our law, and those who break our law by entering the United States illegally."

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Graphic

Photo: Speaking to reporters yesterday about problems with impending immigration legislation were, from left, Representatives Roy Blunt, F. James Sensenbrenner Jr., Vernon J. Ehlers, Peter T. King and the speaker, J. Dennis Hastert, who said that the House would not be hurried. (Photo by Jamie Rose for The New York Times)

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