Immigration compromise bid to debut today

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Body

In an attempt to strike a pre-election Republican ***compromise*** on ***immigration***, two conservative lawmakers will unveil a plan ***today*** that would allow most of the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States a chance to work in the United States legally but only after the government certifies that U.S. borders have been sufficiently secured, two congressional aides said.

The proposal -- sponsored by Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas and Rep. Mike Pence of Indiana -- would pressure illegal immigrants to ``self-deport'' to their home countries within two years of the law's enactment and apply for a new kind of visa that would allow them to return to the United States quickly and work legally if a job awaits them. They would have to work here for 17 years, however, to be eligible for U.S. citizenship.

The plan, which has received mixed reviews from those briefed on it, is aimed at unifying Republicans on an issue that has bitterly divided them for months and threatened to damage the party in future elections.

The stringent rules for illegal immigrants are certain to draw bipartisan opposition from those who favor a quicker and easier path to citizenship. Additionally, conservatives who favor legislation to secure the border this year and delay action on guest workers and the citizenship question also are expected to oppose it.

The Washington Post was provided an advance copy of the proposal.

Hutchison and Pence consider it the foundation for a ***compromise*** between the Senate, which voted for a plan that would provide a new path to citizenship, and the House, which has demanded that Congress focus only on securing borders for now. Former House Majority Leader Richard Armey, R-Texas, a critic of the Senate bill, said the new proposal could be ``a bridge between the two bodies.''

Armey, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., and former Republican National Committee chairman Ed Gillespie were briefed on the plan in hopes that they would help build pressure on skeptical lawmakers, the aides said. White House officials, including presidential adviser Karl Rove, have been told of the framework but not the details. A Republican close to the White House said President Bush ``won't be crazy about it, but I think he would sign it.''

The impasse will not be easy to break. The push for a pre-election ***compromise*** has lost its sense of urgency, as both sides privately calculate that no deal might be the best politics and produce the best policy.

Hutchison and Pence think they can bridge the divide. They will emphasize that *__immigration__* laws will not be changed until the president certifies that the borders are secure, the congressional aides said. The plan includes the most popular security measures that have passed the House and Senate, including new border fences, additional enforcement personnel and bigger detention facilities.

The government would spend about two years instituting the security changes. U.S. companies would open Ellis Island-style centers in many countries to process applications for a new kind of work visa, known as the Good Neighbor SAFE (Secure Authorized Foreign Employee) visa. The government would create tamper-proof identification cards that contain personal information and biometric technology designed to minimize fraud. Illegal immigrants would be required to return to their home countries and apply for the SAFE visa. They would undergo criminal background checks and health screenings and would need to prove that a U.S. job awaits them.

The new visa would be offered only to immigrants who came from countries that are part of trade pacts covering Canada, Mexico and most of Central America. The SAFE visas would be good for two years and could be renewed five times, for a total stay of 12 years. At any point, the holders could return to their home countries and apply for U.S. citizenship without paying a fine or back taxes. But they would have to wait in line.

Illegal immigrants could extend their stay beyond 12 years by applying for a five-year X-Change visa, which requires a job and a clean record. After 17 years in the system, X-Change visa-holders could go through the citizenship process without leaving the United States.

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