

Florida GOP's Diaz-Balart, Illinois Democrat form alliance to reform immigration

By JENNA BUZZACCO-FOERSTER

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WASHINGTON _ In politically divided Washington, D.C., there are at least two points many can agree on.

Comprehensive immigration reform can only happen with bipartisan support. And the future of a House proposal may, in part, hinge on the relationship between a South Florida Republican and a Democrat from Illinois.

“Our relationship, to me, is key to the cornerstone for future success,” said Rep. Luis Gutiérrez, a Democrat from Illinois, about Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, R-Miami, who is among those leading the charge for a House immigration proposal.

“To me, it’s part of the foundation for the future success to comprehensive immigration reform. I say that because he comes from an immigrant background, but he understands the issue and he’s well-respected in his caucus, not only among leadership, but the rank-and-file,” Gutiérrez said.

Diaz-Balart, whose district includes eastern Collier County, was one of the original members of the bipartisan group that formed last year to come up with a House plan. The group disbanded, but Diaz-Balart, along with key members of his staff, took it upon himself to continue working on a bill that would deal with border security and legalization.

“There’s a consensus that the entire immigration system is broken,” Diaz-Balart said over breakfast at Pete’s Diner near his Washington, D.C., office. “So we have two options. Do nothing, which means that we still don’t control who comes in and what comes in. Which means we have millions of people here who we don’t know who they are, what they’re doing and we can’t control ...

“Or we can solve it.”

Solve it is what he’s trying to do.

Diaz-Balart said he’s working with a few other members of Congress, whose names he declined to disclose, to draft a proposal that would get the necessary Republican votes to get on the House floor, and be amenable to House and Senate Democrats.

Gutiérrez isn’t among the small group working on the current draft, but is encouraged

by the efforts of his colleague across the aisle.

"I say bipartisanship. Let's have the Republicans speak. Let's have the president speak. And here's what I'm going to do, I'm going to listen very carefully and I'm going to look for ways to say 'Yes,'" Gutiérrez told the Naples Daily News in between floor votes Thursday. "I'm going to look for ways to move forward on this issue, because you know this has to be done Republicans and Democrats together."

Diaz-Balart declined to give specifics about his proposal. However, it's likely the final immigration package will be several different pieces of legislation.

The primary measure will deal with border security and legalization.

The piecemeal approach is a stark difference to the Senate proposal, which was approved overwhelmingly last year but fell flat in the House.

"The Senate plan is a bipartisan bill that is wholly comprehensive," said Elizabeth Durden, a sociology professor at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pa. "It incorporated border security, increased enforcement measures, as well as offering a pathway to citizenship for the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States."

However, some have said the size of the bill is what is deterring House members from taking it up. The thinking is many members would rather address every issue separately, rather than take up one big bill.

Diaz-Balart said his proposal would lay out a way to "finally, definitively secure the border of the United States." As for the legalization aspect of his measure, Diaz-Balart said it will address "the folks that are here."

Gutiérrez also supports creating a path for those here.

"I say the way forward is let's legalize the 11 million undocumented workers in this country, give them a work permit, allow them to travel, allow them to get right with the law, pay their penalty, encourage them to learn English and incorporate themselves fully," Gutiérrez said. "I want them not standing on the outskirts of our legal system, but inside, following all rules with new responsibility and new opportunities."

Previous proposals included a system that required people living in the United States illegally to come forward and declare their status. They would then face fines, be required to pay taxes and essentially be put on probation for a period of time.

"There exists strong debate on the pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants," Durden said. "While the Senate bill included such provisions, and is strongly advocated by President Obama and immigrant advocate groups, real resistance lies with House Republicans who are loathe to support this measure, arguing citizenship rewards lawbreakers."

There have been signs the House is revving up to make 2014 the year of immigration reform.

House Speaker John Boehner recently hired Rebecca Tallent, the former immigration policy director at the Bipartisan Policy Center. The House Judiciary Committee said immigration reform would be a priority in 2014.

And a bipartisan budget bill that recently passed the House and Senate is giving people hope.

“Bipartisanship is important because neither party has unanimity on the issue,” said Teresa Cardinal Brown, immigration policy director at the Bipartisan Policy Center.

Both Diaz-Balart and Gutiérrez are confident 2014 will be the year a bill passes the House. From there, it would need to be approved by the Senate and president. Both men said it will take some work, but are confident it will happen.

“He has a lot of work to do. He has to go coordinate with the Republican majority, which we know up to this date has not been forthcoming,” Gutiérrez said about what lies ahead for Diaz-Balart. “And I know he’s playing a key, central, critical role to the development of those principles and whatever legislative language that surfaces.

“I’m very, very (positive),” he said. “It will happen. 2014. Get your camera ready.”

Diaz-Balart is gearing up for the battle, and said he thinks the issue will come up “relatively early” in the year.

“I think we can get this done. But the question is getting it right,” he said. “Our challenge is can we get the policy right? Can we get the vast majority of Republicans and a group of Democrats to do this? I think we can. I’m optimistic.”



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