

Small Window Open For Immigration Reform

By Ken Melban

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Now that the 2012 election year politics have concluded, an elevated conversation is emerging about the importance of immigration reform legislation in 2013. Each party is addressing this issue in a bipartisan fashion with a goal of tightening border security while establishing an opportunity for undocumented, yet contributing, societal members to be offered legal status.

At first it was the “Gang of Eight”: Four Republican and four Democratic senators including Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL), a potential 2016 presidential candidate, announcing in January their proposal for a 2013 immigration reform bill. This was followed by President Obama holding a press conference in Las Vegas where he expressed his commitment to immigration reform by saying, “If Congress is unable to move forward in a timely fashion, I will send up a bill based on my proposal and insist that they vote on it right away.”

Nearly everyone, regardless of party affiliation, will agree that the current immigration system is broken, and that it has been broken for years. The question is with everyone saying our immigration system is broken and they want to fix it, why can't it just be fixed? The reason, though just a single eight-letter word, is extremely complex. Politics.

The president's speech created some challenges for Republican leaders who do not want to appear to acquiesce to the president. As evidenced by the 2012 election where more than 70 percent of Hispanic votes were cast for President Obama, Republicans need to gain support with Latino voters. But the more involved the president is in immigration reform, the riskier it becomes for them.

Recently Brendan Buck, House Speaker John Boehner's spokesperson, said “There are a lot of ideas about how best to fix our broken immigration system. Any solution should be a bipartisan one, and we hope the president is careful not to drag the debate to the left and ultimately disrupt the difficult work that is ahead in the House and Senate.”

In mid-February the president's proposal was “leaked” from the White House, further raising the ire of the Republicans. In addition, the president's proposal made no mention of agricultural provisions, a critical component for many. The Democratic Party has its own balancing act to perform. To maintain Latino support, it needs to deliver on its promise for immigration reform, yet somehow figure out



Congresswoman Lois Capps of California's 24th District (Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo Counties) and Ken Melban.

a way to not upset labor unions, longtime party supporters. While labor might publicly support comprehensive immigration reform, some are resistant as they see undocumented workers as a potential threat to their union jobs.

The issue of granting citizenship is also causing some divide. The United Farm Workers are adamant that any reform must include a pathway to full citizenship, which is part of the Democrats' proposal. But most Republicans are in favor of providing legal status but not citizenship.

In February, I met separately with 11 congressional members to voice the California avocado industry's concerns regarding the need for an immigration reform bill now. In meeting after meeting Congress members seemed less than optimistic that immigration reform would be passed this year. While many of them publicly put on a positive face, privately they shared that passage will be very difficult. There is some hope it could pass in the Senate, but less hope on the House side. Within the House there is a bipartisan, not so secret, “Secret Group of Six” members who have been working on a proposal that is purportedly further along than the Senate's Gang of Eight.

The commission is staying engaged on this issue through congressional member meetings and participating in both the Agriculture Workforce Coalition (AWC) and the Agriculture Coalition for Immigration Reform (ACIR). Both coalitions are integrally involved in working with the Senate Gang of Eight and the House Secret Group of Six to ensure agriculture's needs are addressed. Immigration reform must happen this year before mid-term election campaigning begins in the fall of 2013 and probably dooms the effort. 🥑