

Inland reactions mixed to Obama's shelving of immigration overhaul plans

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By **BEN GOAD**

Washington Bureau, Riverside Press Enterprise

As the nation grapples with health care reform and climate change legislation, another of President Barack Obama's key policy goals -- one with the potential to be even more divisive -- has been quietly placed on the back burner.

Obama's recent acknowledgment that comprehensive immigration reform would likely have to wait until next year is drawing mixed reactions from Inland leaders on both sides of the immigration debate.

Local proponents of sweeping reform described the delays as a significant setback but said they were confident that Obama still intends to push forward with legislation.

"The president made this decision not because he wanted to, he just felt there was too much going on," said the Rev. Patricio Guillen, executive director of San Bernardino-based Librería del Pueblo, an immigrant-assistance group.

"I don't blame him completely, but I don't excuse him either," Guillen said. "The Hispanic community is a part of what got him elected."

Critics of Obama's plan, meanwhile, expressed relief that the administration would not attempt to push legislation through this year and suggested that the White House was backing away from the issue once described as "the third rail of American politics" by then-Rep. Rahm Emanuel, who now serves as Obama's chief of staff.

"Anytime we can push that debate out the window is good, because that's where it needs to go," said Andy Ramirez, founder and chairman of Friends of the Border Patrol.

Ramirez said the Chino-based group favors an overhaul of the federal agencies responsible for overseeing immigration instead of creating new legislation.

As a candidate, Obama said immigration reform would be a top priority in the first year of his presidency. Obama last week said he remained hopeful that draft legislation would emerge by the end of the year, but he conceded that there are too many large issues looming to attempt passage until 2010.

Much as the inclusion of a public insurance option has been the epicenter of the ongoing health care debate, a component of Obama's immigration plan that would give millions of undocumented immigrants a pathway to citizenship promises to be the central point of contention.

Obama is expecting a fight on the provision, which opponents describe as unfair amnesty that puts illegal aliens ahead of immigrants seeking to enter the country legally.

"Now, am I going to be able to snap my fingers and get this done? No," Obama acknowledged. "There are going to be demagogues out there who try to suggest that any form of pathway for legalization for those who are already in the United States is unacceptable."

Rep. Ken Calvert, R-Corona, a staunch opponent of Obama's plan, said the postponement shows that congressional Democrats who champion reform are "in retreat."

Rep. Joe Baca, D-Rialto, disagreed, saying the announcement represents only a temporary delay.

"We know the president is in tune with our issues, and strongly believe comprehensive immigration reform will get the national attention it deserves and will be passed into law soon," said Baca, a member of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus.

Still, some reform supporters worry that postponement might hurt the chances of passage, especially in an election year when lawmakers concerned with keeping their seats will face added pressures to appease constituents on both sides of the debate.

"It's definitely a big disappointment," said Jennaya Dunlap, who runs the Romoland-based Rapid Response Network. The group fights abuses of immigrants and supports reform.

"There is a huge number of workers in this country that have no rights," Dunlap said.

Reach Ben Goad at 202-661-8422 or bgoad@PE.com

Additional comments by Ramirez: "Immigration reform, also known as amnesty, did not work in 1986-87, and overwhelmed the system which was rife with fraud. No administration has done anything about this issue since Eisenhower in 1959. That's 50 years ago! Sure, manpower increased under Bush, but like the virtual technology, it is pure lipservice. The academy courses trainees go through were watered down, and background checks are a joke. All-purpose/all-weather border roads were not installed with the border fence, though the Sensenbrenner - Hunter bill required it, proving the administration cares nothing about agent safety.

The real problem outside of internal corruption is will, and the leaders of the agencies responsible at DHS have had no will. Just as Mexico has no will to provide jobs, since it's easier to export their labor force (of minimum/low skills) to the US.

While the sizes of dope (including contraband) and cash seizures have increased since Obama took office, this raises questions since the same people outside of the Cabinet ran the actual agencies. This includes David Aguilar Chief of the Border Patrol, Tom Winkowski, Asst. Commissioner for the Office of Field Operations (formerly known as Customs), Acting CBP Commissioner Jayson Ahern, Gen. Kostelnic at CBP Air, Marcy Foreman over at ICE, and Michelle Leonhart who is continuing to serve as Acting Administrator at DEA. So clearly you have the same people running the same agencies and this raises questions about their effectiveness under the previous administration.

Mexico needs to create an economy, jobs, and put all the bad guys out of business. The only overhaul needed in the US is inside the agencies, with more Congressional oversight.