

Erickson Column: First step? The border

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The U.S. immigration system is “broken and needs fixing.” So confirms President Obama after meeting with Republican and Democratic leaders last Thursday. Although there is no consensus yet in terms of what a restructuring of the immigration system will include, the process has now begun in earnest to adopt a comprehensive plan. President Obama acknowledged that the broken immigration system is “one of the most critical issues” that our nation faces.

In his remarks following the meeting, President Obama said: “My administration is fully behind an effort to achieve comprehensive immigration reform. I have asked my Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, Secretary Janet Napolitano, to lead up a group that is going to be working with a leadership group from both the House and the Senate to start systematically working through these issues . . .”

One of the key issues that must be dealt with early in the immigration discussion concerns border security. At this point the American public is just not persuaded that the borders are secure. Until the borders are secured, it is unclear whether there are enough votes for the passage of comprehensive immigration reform. Senator Mel Martinez (R-Fla.) said “I think the votes in the Senate are a little dicey at the moment. I don’t think it can pass today.” Developing an intelligent plan that clearly articulates the steps to make the border more secure will go a long way in getting the necessary votes.

President Obama is clearly aware that the road ahead will be bumpy. In his statement he said: “We all know that comprehensive immigration reform is difficult. We know it’s a sensitive and politically volatile issue. One of the things that was said around the table is the American people still don’t have enough confidence that Congress and any administration is going to get serious about border security, and so they’re concerned that any immigration reform simply will be a short-term legalization of undocumented workers with no long-term solution with respect to future flows of illegal immigration.”

It seems that the president has hit the nail on the head. In order to come up with a meaningful immigration policy that will serve our nation long-term, the government must come up with a solution to secure the borders. Assuming this can be accomplished, then the many issues associated with immigration reform can be debated.

On the eve of last week’s bipartisan meeting with the president, Senator Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), who chairs the Senate’s main immigration subcommittee, offered that one of the ideas being considered is a requirement that all U.S. workers verify their identity through fingerprint or eye scan. As reported by The Washington Post, Schumer said that

a national system to verify work authorization is necessary because Congress hasn't cracked down hard enough on unscrupulous employers and illegal immigrants with fake documents. Schumer shows he gets the key issue when he says: "The American people will never accept immigration reform unless they truly believe their government is committed to ending future illegal immigration." In a nutshell, that is the issue. Control the borders, and then fix the broken system.

There are approximately 12 million illegal immigrants in the U.S. Schumer expects legislation to be enacted that will secure the nation's borders and require those here illegally to register with the government and "submit to a rigorous process to convert to legal status," or face immediate deportation.

Done right, there is the opportunity to achieve some real long-lasting benefits here, not the least of which is the securing of our borders, having millions of non-tax paying people come out of the shadows and onto the tax rolls and developing a process to ensure that the work force is legitimate.

President Obama has conceded that "It's going to require some heavy lifting; it's going to require a victory of practicality and common sense and good policymaking over short term politics." Here's to the effort; let's hope that all involved have the clarity and foresight to address the obvious first — securing our borders, and then the muscle to see through the remaining challenges.

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