

Hastert: Immigrant Plan Unlikely to Pass

By Eric Krol - Daily Herald Political Writer

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House Speaker Dennis Hastert all but declared President Bush's controversial immigration plan dead Thursday.

While the powerful Republican from Yorkville said he backs Bush's idea of giving illegal immigrants temporary worker status, he doubts the votes are there to pass it.

"We already have had six bills in Congress before Bush ever said (anything)," Hastert told the Daily Herald editorial board in an hour-long session that also touched on his views on defending traditional marriage. "Our chairman of the judiciary, where this has to go through, has not been very receptive to it. So I'm not even sure we'll get it through the judiciary committee."

Bush spokesman Jim Morrell said the president "has expressed his willingness to work with Congress on this issue." The president's parameters are immigration reform that protects U.S. borders, makes sure workers are protected from losing jobs to immigrants and matches eager workers with eager employers, Morrell said.

Under Bush's plan, which he plugged in Tuesday's State of the Union address, illegal immigrants could legally work in the United States for up to six years and travel back to their native country without fear of having their return blocked.

Hastert said he has sponsored temporary worker legislation in the past and praised Bush for starting the debate on the immigration issue.

"You've got to look at the issue," said Hastert, whose district includes Kane and western

DuPage counties. "To try to put up a wall across the border, which I tried to do a long time ago, you can't do that either."

House Judiciary Chairman F. James Sensenbrenner, a Wisconsin Republican, has criticized Bush's idea as an amnesty plan for illegal immigrants. A spokesman did not return a call Thursday.

Only two out of Illinois' seven suburban congressmen and two senators support Bush's plan - Hastert and Sen. Peter Fitzgerald, an Inverness Republican. The Democrats in the delegation say the plan does too little in terms of granting citizenship to illegal immigrants already here while the Republicans say it rewards those who broke the law by crossing the border.

Hastert also supported the idea of a constitutional amendment to define marriage as between a man and woman.

"A constitutional amendment is very difficult to pass, but I think that may be the only alternative to what has happened," he said, adding that no amendments have gotten the required two-thirds majority in the two decades he's been in Congress.

The speaker also favors Bush's plan to spend \$1.2 billion to promote marriage, saying that encouraging young people to get married rather than have children out of wedlock is a "beneficial thing to do."

Some Democrats, including Sen. Dick Durbin of Springfield and U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky of Evanston, say the money could be better spent on health care. Schakowsky, whose district includes Des Plaines, said it would be the federal government "shaking its finger at the poor" when half of all new marriages end in divorce.

"Are they going to the Hamptons to talk about marriage?" she said.