Tech Leaders Plan Virtual Push on Immigration

ERICA WERNER,Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — High-tech leaders including the former heads of AOL and Mozilla are organizing a "virtual march for immigration reform [1]" aimed at pressuring lawmakers to enact sweeping changes to the nation's immigration laws.

The effort unveiled Monday is particularly focused on making it easier for the U.S. to attract highly educated immigrants and those aiming to work in high-tech fields.

Silicon Valley leaders and others have long complained of the difficulties of bringing high-tech workers to the U.S. and allowing them to stay once they're here, and immigration legislation taking shape on Capitol Hill is expected to address the issue.

The new effort, backed by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's Partnership for a New American Economy, aims to collect supporters and organize a date this spring for them to flood lawmakers' offices via Twitter, Facebook, and other means.

"What we're essentially doing is having tech leaders use technology to influence the debate," said John Feinblatt, Bloomberg's chief policy adviser. "In the in the old days, people used to hire a lobbyist."

The possibilities of such an approach were illustrated last year when Congress dropped legislation to crack down on online piracy after a massive campaign by Internet services and users.

The new effort brings together an array of high-tech heavy hitters including Steve Case, co-founder of AOL and chief executive of Revolution; John Lilly, former chief executive of Mozilla and partner at Greylock Partners; venture capitalist Mike Maples; and Brad Feld, managing director of the Foundry Group.

"We've got to make the case that in today's economy the currency is talent, and we need the talent in this country if we want to continue to be the great economic leader that we are," Feinblatt said.

The group's priorities for emerging immigration legislation include more visas for high-tech workers; a new visa for entrepreneurs, something some other industrialized nations already offer; and permanent resident status for immigrants who graduate from U.S. universities with degrees in science, technology, engineering and math.

These are all measures supported by President Barack Obama and are likely to be embraced to some degree in legislation being written in the Senate by a bipartisan group of negotiators.

Current law limits the number of immigrants who can come to the U.S. to work for

high-tech companies and provides no straightforward path for top-tier graduates to stay here. More so than other areas of the immigration debate, such as border security and a path to legalization for the 11 million illegal immigrants already here, boosting high-tech immigration tends to enjoy bipartisan support, although there've been disputes in Congress over how to accomplish the goal.

Online: www.marchforinnovation.com [1]

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