

McCain: Bush must do more on immigration

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WASHINGTON -- President Bush needs to do more to help push a temporary guest worker program through Congress, Republican Sen. John McCain, the author of a key immigration bill, said Tuesday.

McCain, acknowledging that Bush has stepped up a campaign on behalf of the program, said the president has credibility on the issue because he was governor of Texas, the state with the largest border with Mexico.

"Would I want him to do more? From my perspective, probably," McCain said in a conference call with reporters.

McCain held the conference call in advance of town hall meetings in Miami on Thursday and New York on Monday.

The administration has toyed with the idea of a temporary worker program since Bush took office in 2001. But it was pushed to a back burner by the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, which triggered an outcry for a crackdown on immigration.

In early 2004, Bush laid out guidelines for a temporary worker program. But the 2004 elections made the administration and some in Congress reluctant to address it. That year, frustrated members of a Senate committee openly criticized Bush for failing to fight for his own proposal.

Bush "is very carefully timing his involvement as debate begins" in the Senate, McCain said. "This issue is going to be decided in forums all over America."

Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., has told lawmakers the Senate will begin considering immigration legislation March 27.

The Senate Judiciary Committee is expected to vote on a bill on March 2. McCain, however, predicted the Senate would not consider immigration reform until April or possibly later because of lobbying reform legislation.

The House passed an immigration enforcement bill last year that called for building fences on the U.S.-Mexican border, allowing local law officials to enforce immigration laws, and requiring employers to verify the legal status of their employees.

Lawmakers remain divided on the 11 million illegal immigrants already in the country. Sens. John Cornyn, R-Texas, and Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., have proposed they leave the country before participating in the temporary worker program. McCain and the co-author of his bill, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., have proposed a path for workers already here to earn legal status.