

House may pass security bill today

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The House is expected to pass a homeland security bill and send it to President Bush as early as today. Last night, the Senate approved the package of security measures recommended by the 9/11 Commission, shifting more federal money to high-risk states and cities and requiring more stringent screening of air and sea cargo.

The measure passed by a 85-8 vote.

House passage would give Democrats a much-needed legislative victory just a week before Congress adjourns for its August recess.

Along with a boost in the minimum wage, which went into effect on Tuesday, the 9/11 Commission bill would be at the top of the Democratic majority's achievement list if President Bush signs it into law.

The White House has expressed opposition to several provisions in the bill, particularly a requirement that within five years all ship containers be scanned for nuclear devices before they leave foreign ports for the United States, but it has not issued a veto threat.

The administration has questioned the feasibility of installing radiation monitoring equipment in more than 600 foreign ports. To soften opposition, the bill's authors gave the Homeland Security secretary authority to delay implementation in two-year increments if needed.

The bill also requires the screening of all cargo on passenger aircraft within three years.

The independent 9/11 Commission in 2004 came out with 41 recommendations to prevent another terrorist attack, covering tighter domestic security, reform of intelligence gathering and new foreign policy directions.

Congress and the White House followed through on several of those recommendations, including creating the new position of director of national intelligence and tightening screening procedures on land borders.

But Democrats, in taking over Congress, charged that the GOP response to the recommendations had been insufficient. The House passed its version of the 9/11 bill on the first day of Democratic control last January, and the Senate approved its bill in March.

Efforts to reach a House-Senate compromise on the issue gained momentum only after Democrats agreed to drop language, which had prompted a veto threat, that would have given airport screeners collective bargaining rights.

Other Democratic priorities have met with less success: Immigration reform couldn't get through the Senate, the president vetoed stem cell research legislation, and the House and Senate were still trying to work out a deal on lobbying reform.

The 9/11 bill would change the formula for distributing federal security grants to ensure that high-risk states and urban areas get a greater share. High-risk cities such as New York and Washington have complained that the current formula, which divides money more evenly around the country, does not reflect the realities of the terrorist threat.

The bill also establishes a new interoperability grant program to assure that local, state and federal officials can communicate with each other and approves \$4 billion over four years for rail, transit and bus security.

It strengthens security measures for the Visa Waiver Program, which allows travelers from select countries to visit the United States without a visa and, in another provision opposed by the White House, requires that the total amount appropriated for the intelligence community be made public.

Final House-Senate agreement this week came only after Democrats agreed to a Republican demand that gives protection from lawsuits to people who in good faith report what they believe is terrorist activity around airplanes, trains and buses. The issue grew out of an incident last fall when six Muslim scholars were removed from a Minneapolis flight after other

passengers said they were acting strangely. The scholars have filed suit, saying their civil rights were violated.

The bills are H.R.1 and S.4

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