

Boehner defends rejecting immigration measure

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(AP) — House Speaker John Boehner on Tuesday defended a decision by Republican leaders to reject a GOP congressman's effort to bring his immigration bill to a vote.

Boehner told reporters that the national defense bill was not the place for a vote on California Rep. Jeff Denham's measure offering citizenship to immigrants who serve in the military.

Defying House Republican leaders, Denham filed his bill, known as the ENLIST Act, as an amendment to the sweeping defense policy measure that the House will consider this week. Denham intended to offer his measure as an amendment to the defense bill during a meeting of the House Rules Committee on Tuesday.

The bill "provides an avenue for those who want to perform the ultimate act of patriotism — serving their county — to earn legal status," Denham said in a statement. "As a veteran, I can think of no better way to demonstrate your commitment to our nation."

House leaders, who control the Rules Committee, have made clear that Denham's effort will be denied.

Boehner says there have been discussions about allowing Denham a stand-alone vote on his bill but no decision has been made.

The dispute comes with comprehensive immigration legislation stalled in the House, where even small-bore measures like Denham's cannot gain support.

The Senate passed a comprehensive bill last year that would boost border security, remake legal worker programs and offer a path to citizenship to the estimated 11.5 million people now living here illegally. That bill remains stalled in the Republican-led House, where Boehner has blamed GOP distrust of President Barack Obama to enforce any law for the inaction.

Despite a wide coalition of business, labor, religious groups, farmers and others pushing for an immigration overhaul, many individual Republican House members who represent largely white districts have been unmoved. That's particularly true in an election year amid concerns about angering core GOP voters.

Denham's measure was widely popular and seen as perhaps the likeliest area for compromise on the divisive issue of immigration.

Denham's bill would allow immigrants who were brought to this country on or before Dec. 31, 2011, and were younger than 15 years old to become legal, permanent residents — the first step toward

citizenship — through honorable service in the military.

It was co-sponsored by 50 House members, 26 Democrats and 24 Republicans, but an outspoken minority was opposed. Rep. Mo Brooks, R-Ala., had warned that "all hell will break loose" if Denham tried to promote the measure.