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Former INS chief says reviving immigration reform difficult

By ANABELLE GARAY Associated Press Writer

DALLAS -- Reviving talks about reforming immigration law will prove difficult even after a new president and members of Congress take office, the former head of immigration services said Thursday.

Doris Meissner, the Immigration and Naturalization Service Commissioner under President Clinton, said the next president will want to first tackle issues that have broad support and are likely to glide through Congress.

"And unfortunately, immigration, unless something changes very dramatically ... does not qualify as one of those issues," Meissner told an immigration conference held by the National Council of Jewish Women. "It is a polarized issue."

Strong Latino turnout in the upcoming election could grab lawmakers' attention and get immigration reform back on the agenda, said Meissner, now a senior fellow at the Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank.

"It is an issue that is basically in the throes of the extremes and the extreme voices in both parties," she said.

Immigration reform is key to strengthening the nation's economy, Meissner said.

For example, she said, technology and engineering keep the U.S. competitive, but about half the students pursuing careers in those fields are foreign-born. And nearly a dozen of the fastest-growing occupations don't require a high school diploma and attract few American-born workers, she added.

"It is not possible for people to come here legally if they want ... to work and if there is a job here for them, particularly if it is in the low skilled sector," Meissner said.