Expand visas for seasonal, skilled workers

by The Detroit News

Congress must fix two desirable features of U.S. immigration policy that are skewed by election-year politicking. Stalled are proposals to allow more visas for college graduates and, in a separate program, for seasonal workers.

Both initiatives are long-running and benefit the U.S. economy. They're among the few U.S. immigration policies that work well. But they're not getting needed attention - leaving adrift businesses ranging from Microsoft Corp. to the Grand Hotel on Michigan's Mackinac Island.

Last fall, Congress unexpectedly failed to renew a provision of H-2B seasonal visas. The provision allowed entry to nonagricultural workers who had already worked in the U.S. for three years.

The congressional Hispanic caucus, among others, objected to renewing the law without comprehensive reform. But wholesale reform is a political third rail in an election year and won't happen.

Meanwhile, businesses that relied on the visas are left hanging. The storied Grand Hotel had trouble replacing seasonal employees who have worked there for 20 years. It's difficult to find U.S. workers willing to move to an island for six months and - at season's end - move back, say hotel officials. So the hotel is scrambling.

A second immigration provision also needs revising. It has a different visa number, H-1B. They're for workers with a bachelor's degree or higher. The program admits up to 85,000 applicants a year, not enough to fill demand.

Last summer, Microsoft announced plans for software development in Vancouver, Canada, north of its U.S. headquarters. The move helps the company recruit and retain highly skilled engineers who didn't make the U.S. visa lottery.

For every skilled worker with an H-1B visa, U.S. companies add five other employees, says a recent study by the National Foundation for American Policy, a nonpartisan think tank in Arlington, Va.

Skilled immigrant workers complement, not replace, U.S. hires, the study said. Last year, U.S. companies filed 150,000 applications for the 85,000 available visas. Monday was the first day this year they could apply to hire foreign skilled-workers. And demand is again expected to far outstrip available slots. Together, the two

visa programs are less than a drop in the bucket compared with 12 million illegal immigrants in the country. Those who sneaked over the border are the problem and have caused the furor. The people who get work visas are, by definition, legal immigrants.

They should be encouraged. Lawmakers should put aside politics long enough to revamp rules for seasonal workers and skilled workers.

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