

Immigration: an economic issue

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The economy fuels the fire of the immigration debate in our country. The controversy over immigration - both illegal and legal - can take many philosophical turns, and even political parties do not offer a united front. The issue is complicated, politically charged, and not likely to be solved anytime soon, especially with a presidential election in the future.

But there is no doubt that if there were no jobs available to immigrants, or employers willing to hire them, there would not be an immigration debate.

One small result of the recent raids in Reno on illegal immigrants working in McDonalds was that owner Luther Mack was seen working behind the counter at the McDonald's in Sparks. Where were the American workers lining up to fill those vacant jobs at McDonald's in Reno?

In Tahoe, where are the American workers filling out applications for ski area jobs? Why are so many lift operators from South America?

In the Bonanza's Web poll today, 60 percent of respondents said only Americans should fill jobs. But why have we created an economy where that is impossible?

Diamond Peak last week said there was a "crisis" because the visa quota of H-2B temporary workers has been filled and the exemption to allow these skilled workers into the country has expired. Several key workers at Diamond Peak are unable to return to the United States this winter and do their jobs, and this scenario is being repeated at ski resorts across the country.

It wouldn't be a crisis in the ski industry nationwide if there were Americans to step in and fill those jobs.

This is a situation involving temporary legal immigration, affecting businesses and ultimately the economy.

The situation involving illegal immigration is even more complex, but just as compelling to businesses.

According to the Pew Hispanic Center, analysis of the March 2005 Current Population Survey shows there were 11.1 million unauthorized migrants in the United States a year ago. Based on analysis of other data sources that indicate of the pace of growth in the foreign-born population, the center estimates of 11.5 to 12 million unauthorized migrants were in the United States as of March 2006.

That is a huge population of illegal immigrants, working in low paying jobs and not paying taxes. But the fact remains is that it is a workforce American businesses are using.

No one can advocate for hiring an illegal immigrant. It is wrong. But as long as an employer is willing to hire an illegal immigrant, no wall on the boarder can keep an immigrant away from that job.

Congress and the President really need to address the employment issue before they can address any border issues. If our country truly needs an additional workforce, other than American citizens, then it needs to figure out how employers can legally hire legal workers from another country.

One small way is for Congress to pass the "Save Our Small and Seasonal Businesses Act of 2007" which was introduced earlier this year. It would affect about 50,000 workers who hold an H-2B temporary work visa.

These are workers who want to come into our country and work legally for a temporary time (ski season), pay their taxes and then return to their own countries when the job is finished.

Wouldn't that be a good model for the rest of the economic/immigration issue?