

'Ugly American' bill passes committee; allows more foreign models to work in U.S.

Dick Russ

5/9/2008

WASHINGTON, DC -- A bill that would allow more foreign fashion models to work in the United States has been passed by a House subcommittee.

Congressman Steve King, Iowa Republican and member of the subcommittee, objected to the legislation and called H.R. 4080 the "ugly American bill," reported the publication Congressional Quarterly Today.

Under the bill, fashion models of "distinguished merit and ability" would be part of a special category previously reserved for actors, musicians, and sports figures who enter the United States for a short period of time.

"Is it possible our schools aren't producing enough young adults that can navigate a runway? I think not," King told his fellow subcommittee members according to Congressional Quarterly Today, which reported his colleagues snickered at the statement.

CQ Today also reported that 800 foreign models temporarily entered the U.S. last year. The new visa class would allow 1,000.

News of a special exemption for "distinguished" fashion models did not sit well with Cleveland area business who have been lobbying Congress to renew the program that permits them to use enough returning foreign workers to meet their business needs.

"It's unbelievable," said Mary Wheeler of Wheeler Landscaping in Geauga County. Her company has used legal temporary foreign workers for years to do jobs she cannot fill locally.

"I've been back and forth six times to Washington to make sure we have a workforce that we cannot hire locally. To date that has not passed," says Wheeler, who is legislative chair of the Ohio Landscape Association.

"Then to find out this bill for fashion models has passed the subcommittee is extremely frustrating. It's disturbing to me where our priorities are in the country."

"I can't believe how that piece of legislation was so easily moved and approved while ours just sat and sat in that subcommittee with no action," Wheeler tells Channel 3 News.

The Geauga County business owner has been at the forefront of an effort to renew the H2B visa program which allows a limited number of seasonal workers to enter the U.S.

"Look, there's nothing wrong with fashion," says Wheeler, "but what about a daily workforce for companies that are actually adding to the local tax base?"

"It's one of the funniest and sillier things that show how broken this system is, that fashion models are more important than seasonal business," said attorney Don Mooers, who counsels the Save Small Business effort, which is trying to preserve their access to seasonal workers.