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Bush's \$3,500 visa plan called too costly in Morris

Immigrants, advocates, officials say illegals couldn't afford to pay

**BY TIEN-SHUN LEE
DAILY RECORD**

Leaders of local immigrant groups on Sunday criticized President Bush's latest proposal for immigration reform, which calls for illegal immigrants to pay \$3,500 to apply for renewable three-year work permits, and for illegals to return to their native countries and then pay a \$10,000 re-entry fee to obtain permanent legal status.

"The president says that he will give me legal status if I go to my country, but his word is not credible," said Hernan Lopez, a leader of a group of Dover-based day laborers. "The president is not trustworthy."

Lopez called Bush's proposed return-home policy a "trick," and added that coming up with \$3,500 would be very difficult for immigrants who recently arrived -- let alone \$10,000.

Bush's proposal, which partially was floated by members of his administration last week, also indicates that the criteria for those who are allowed to immigrate would be reworked to favor "merit-based and national-need categories" over those who have relatives in the country.

"I'm concerned about the lack of focus on family identification," said Amy Gottlieb, an immigration lawyer who directs the American Friends Service Committee, a Newark-based immigrants rights program.

Gottlieb called Bush's new proposal a "temporary, Band-Aid program."

"This is a very punitive program that will benefit very few people. Most people can't afford those kind of fees," she said. "We need something more comprehensive that includes as many people as possible."

Morristown Mayor Donald Cresitello, who has been pushing for federal permission to deputize local police officers as immigration agents, said Bush's new plan at least is a starting point for discussion -- but that the fees are too high and could encourage more illegal activity.

"\$3,500 might be quite steep and it might be hard for someone to accumulate this amount of money," the mayor said. "They might have to continue to work illegally."

Cresitello favors granting temporary work permits immediately, and requiring people to return to their native countries within a specified period of time with a document inviting them to come back.

"I would say, 'OK, you're here. You can stay for a period of time.' Then within a certain period of time, they would go with a work permit that would guarantee reentry," he said. "It would be an orderly process over a period of time."

Cresitello said he doesn't think it is necessary to impose a \$10,000 fine to reenter the country.

"I mean, why is it \$10,000, and who pays the \$10,000?" the mayor asked. "Are all people required to pay the same fine just because they crossed the border, or is the one who has been here 20 years illegally required to pay more?"

Immigration reform is a complex social problem that needs to be managed "without emotion but with compassion," Cresitello said.

"There is this problem with families, and there's the view that this is a global economy and they have the right to be here," he said. "From a social engineering point of view, you have to deal with employment, family, how to let people go and let them come back ... I do believe we could use the labor in this country."

Diana Mejia, the director of the Wind of the Spirit, a Morristown-based immigrant advocacy group, said Bush's new proposal makes her laugh.

"This is not a serious effort to let (undocumented) people adjust their status," she said. "We are talking about costs that are not going to allow people to enter into the legal system."

Undocumented people who work in this country and pay taxes should be given a reasonable way to adjust their status without having to go back to their native countries, Mejia said.

"If they're already here and supporting the economy of the country, then it doesn't make sense to require them to return to their native country," she said.

Gottlieb also favors a program that will offer permanent residency to the millions of undocumented immigrants without requiring them to go home.

"We recognize the needs of the community and the reasons that people migrate," she said. "We need to address both the problem with the backlog in the waiting list (to legally enter from other countries), and the problems here with those without status."

Bush plans to speak in Arizona today about his new immigration plan.

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