

Election Year HOT Issue

Legalization:

Many Hope, But Doubts Remain

“Their search for a better life is one of the most basic desires of human beings. Many undocumented workers have walked mile after mile, through the heat of the day and the cold of the night. Some have risked their lives in dangerous desert border crossings. The situation I described is wrong. It is not the American way.”

President George W. Bush, in a speech about Immigration Policy Reform, January 07, 2004.

On January 07, days before a meeting with Mexican President Vicente Fox in Monterrey, Mexico, President George Bush announced his proposal for a new Temporary Worker Program. It sent waves of hope into Latino communities throughout the United States, including northeast Ohio. Immigration attorneys, outreach workers, even newspapers and television stations were inundated with calls: “Where do we go to apply?”

But the excitement faded quickly as people were told it was a proposal, and needed approval by Congress before it could become law.

U.S. Congressman Steven C. LaTourette, a republican, whose district includes Lake and Ashtabula counties, said he agrees with Bush’s remarks and would support a law to legalize agricultural workers. “If he’s talking about reliable documentation that would give comfort to immigrants and their employers, that’s what I support,” LaTourette told HOLA. “I’m waiting to see what’s done legislatively.” No one knows if Bush will support one of the many bills already pending, or if a new one will be introduced.

Bush’s proposal does not include a means for permanent legalization. It allows only for temporary work permits. It offers less to immigrants than some of the other proposed laws.

LaTourette is one of 88 congressmen who co-sponsored the Agricultural Job Opportunity, Benefits, and Security Act of 2003. That bill would allow agricultural workers to first get temporary

resident status and then eventually become legal permanent residents. It would also make the H2A visa program easier for employers to use, and give workers stronger remedies against abuse.

In fact, there were over 75 immigration related bills introduced Congress last year. This was a 50-percent increase from the previous Congress. Each announcement of a new immigration bill or proposal generates confusion and frustration as many Latinos wonder if they will get permission to work legally and get a driver’s license—their most important needs.

The big question is: are all the recent bills and proposals going anywhere? For now, it appears they are not. “There is a lot of resistance, especially in the border states,” LaTourette said. “But when the president says he wants to do something, it adds more momentum to an issue.”

According to Maria Tambuuri, a White House spokeswoman for Latino media, “The president is looking forward to meeting with the members of Congress to discuss his proposal,” she told HOLA.

Yet many people are skeptical that Bush will help get a bill approved anytime soon, and see his announcement as just a tactic to gain the Latino vote this election year. But Oscar de la Torre, district counsel for the Mexican Consulate in Detroit, which covers northeast Ohio, said the president’s remarks should not be minimized. “It’s important that for the first time, a U.S. presi-



President George W. Bush and President Vicente Fox of Mexico address the media in Monterrey, Mexico, Jan. 12, 2004.

WHITE HOUSE PHOTO BY PAUL MORSE

dent recognized the presence of undocumented people in his country, and that they don’t take jobs from Americans,” De la Torre said. “I think President Bush is very aware of the economic needs of the United States,” he added, “And that the migrant workers are needed, and that it is necessary to do something for them.” De la Torre places the economic impact of migrant workers at about \$30 billion. “We are hopeful that the Congress of the United States also recognizes the importance of migrant workers.”

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