
State needs well-reasoned immigration policy

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By John Broyles
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When the Indiana General Assembly voted down Sen. Mike Delph's proposed immigration legislation this year, Delph promised to return next year with a new bill – and to be “relentless” in his pursuit of passage.

Actually, Delph was relentless this year. Although property tax reform clearly was the session's hot issue, he fought hard for his immigration bill.

While I found his bill to be fundamentally flawed – like so many others, it basically took a “ship-them-all-out” approach without regard to who might suffer or how much – I did appreciate that the attention he brought to the issue might prompt the creation of a plan that considers varied interests and not just the “rule of law.”

Before we can create that plan, we must answer some basic questions.

Why do people come to our country illegally? Because the opportunity to earn wages unimaginable in their own countries makes the risk of arrest, deportation and even death worthwhile, and the needs of their families makes waiting for the drawn-out legal process impractical. Any fix must recognize this compelling attraction and offer practical, flexible and easily understood opportunities.

Why can they come to America? Because our country relies on immigrant labor, and our immigration system is failing in its goals of unifying families, providing employers with sufficient legal work visas and securing our borders.

Also because our geography, economy and openness make border enforcement difficult, and our documentation and tracking systems are inadequate.

Why can they stay? In part, because of our inadequate system, but mostly because we benefit from the work they do. It would be devastating to remove this workforce, especially in the current economy.

Indiana's not going to deport every undocumented alien or make things so bad they'll all leave, but the people of Indiana need to ask themselves if they can support a one-remedy-fits-all approach that would inhibit Indiana's economy, destroy families and hurt businesses. Look at what happened after Oklahoma and Arizona enacted similar laws, as

reported in the Indianapolis Star in February: “declines in school enrollments, a scarcity of construction workers and the sudden emptying of rental homes and apartments.”

The impact? Commercial operations experiencing 50 percent drops in business, and restaurants cutting their hours or closing.

Instead of seeking a quick fix to illegal immigration, we must find solutions that work by addressing many complex issues: border security; new worker-visa rules; better systems for documenting aliens; a tamper-proof employment verification system; and an improved legal immigration system.

What do all of those suggestions have in common? They are federal matters.

Even Delph has admitted this should be a federal issue. But that’s not to say there’s nothing the state can do – so long as we act wisely.

At the end of the session, General Assembly leaders argued that they need time to consider immigration reform. They recommended a summer study process that would inform legislators as they prepare for the next session.

I support that effort, and hope the study committee will take the time to hear from various parties in this debate. This issue will not be resolved by shouting from opposite ends of the spectrum. Neither an amnesty nor a deport-them-all approach will work. The answer lies somewhere in between.

To find this common ground requires negotiation. It requires an honest effort to appreciate the views of the other side. It requires humane debate and real compromise.

It requires relentless pursuit of a real solution, not a quick fix that ignores the social, economic and political interests involved.

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