

# U.S. needs Houston Plan for immigration reform

By Jonathan Day

Updated 07:51 p.m., Tuesday, May 22, 2012

Astonishing changes are occurring in Houston. First, economic growth, despite strong national headwinds, has virtually exploded over the past decade. Between 2000 and 2009, Houston's employment grew by 260,000. During the same period, New York, with nearly three times the population, added only 96,000 jobs. And in the two-year period 2009 and 2010, Houston's income growth rate was 5.7 percent, the second highest of all urban areas in the world. These developments have led the [Brookings Institution](#) to rank Houston as one of the 20 fastest growing cities in the world - the only such city in North America.

Second, we have learned from the latest analysis from Stephen Klineberg, the co-director of the [Kinder Institute for Urban Research](#), that Houston is now the most diverse major city in the nation. Large urban areas with diverse cultures will be the key drivers of the world's future economic growth and in the U.S., Houston is the first mover in this arena.

Our current good fortune and recognized status create new responsibilities. Our voice needs to be heard on the national stage on issues where our experience is directly relevant - and where the outcomes vitally affect our economic future. This need for Houston's leadership is most apparent with regard to the issue of how we should address the current abject failures of our federal immigration system. Our country is essentially stymied in a divisive, bitterly partisan fight on this critical problem.

As the most diverse large city in the nation, and as the home of hundreds of thousands of immigrants over the past decades, Houston has developed an appreciation of both the benefits and the burdens of immigration. Our religious and nonprofit institutions, as well as our public school systems, have learned much about how to support immigrant populations. Catholic Charities and the Anti-Defamation League are actively at work in this arena. And [Neighborhood Centers](#) has taken a leading role by publishing excellent materials that address the objective facts relating to immigration that are so often lost in the emotionalism of the current rhetoric. Most importantly, our business community, led by the [Greater Houston Partnership](#), has developed a thorough understanding of these issues. In short, Houston knows immigration.

So the groundwork exists to prepare Houston to assume a prominent role in addressing this critical issue. There will likely be an opportunity to consider immigration reform in 2013, after the November election, and Houston will be in an ideal position to play a constructive role in these deliberations. Here are the circumstances that will make Houston a pivot point in a national debate on immigration reform.

First, through the Partnership, the Houston business community has already strongly supported immigration reform. In fact, it was business leadership that played a critical role in preventing consideration of Arizona-type bills in the last legislative session. Houston's reputation as a business-oriented city - a city where new business opportunities are an essential part of our culture - clearly improves our national credibility on immigration issues.

Second, the problems of implementing state-by-state immigration laws were underlined by the widely publicized results of such initiatives in Alabama and Arizona.

Third, tightened border security and adverse economic conditions in the U.S. have slowed illegal entry to the lowest point in many years. Net illegal migration has stopped almost completely.

Fourth, our Texas delegation holds important leadership positions - Sen. [John Cornyn](#) is the ranking Republican on the Immigration Subcommittee in the Senate, and Reps. [Sheila Jackson Lee](#) and [Ted Poe](#) serve on the House Immigration Subcommittee.

And last, Houstonians understand how important immigrants are to our economy and our community. They are vital to research at our academic institutions and to filling skilled positions in the medical, engineering and energy sectors. And they are essential in our construction trades and service industries. Klineberg tells us that 100 percent of the growth of Houston over the last 30 years has been non-Anglo, and that, but for immigrants and their children, Houston would have actually declined in population. He concludes that no city has benefited more from immigration.

Most importantly, we pride ourselves on being an open and welcoming city where people who are willing to work hard, pay their taxes and obey the law can get ahead.

These factors obviously do not assure success - but they are building blocks for moving Houston into a prominent national role on this issue in 2013.

What we need to do this year is to create a clear and succinct plan of practical reforms on which Houston's leadership agrees. Even a cursory review of past congressional dialogue on these issues underlines that the essential elements of a moderate and sensible plan can readily be developed. What is needed is not a Republican or a Democratic plan for immigration reform - simply put, we need a [Houston Plan](#).

Once the Houston Plan has been developed, a well organized effort should be initiated to secure its endorsement by the broadest possible array of organizations and leaders, particularly including all the business and labor groups across the region. Every CEO of every substantial Houston company, every nonprofit and every elected official should be asked to endorse the plan. We need the Texas congressional delegation and our national political leaders in both parties to know that the vast majority of Houstonians are behind the Houston Plan and that we want it enacted into federal law in 2013.

*Day, a Houston attorney, delivered these remarks at a recent event where he was awarded the 2012 Karen H. Susman Jurisprudence Award by the Anti-Defamation League's [Southwest Regional Office](#).*

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