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## **Immigration Reform Needs to be Realistic**

By Mike Thompson

9/23/2013 -- Our economy is in desperate need for more middle-class job creation. Recent statistics continue to show a very weak recovery – one of worst recoveries since World War II.

Once Congress gets back to it, the immigration debate needs to focus on reality and not “news bites” and unrealistic concepts.

A 2011 survey by the National Association of Manufacturers reveals that many good middle class jobs go unfilled because of a shortage of qualified workers—especially those with skills in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Former Virginia Governor and U.S. Senator George Allen wrote recently that companies in Virginia and across the nation are finding fewer qualified applicants for technology-heavy jobs because colleges and universities are not graduating enough students trained in these STEM fields. This skills gap could slow economic growth and stunt the innovation that typifies American businesses.

Congressional legislation has been introduced to confront this critical issue. The I-Squared Act was introduced in the Senate as part of a bi-partisan effort to enact major immigration reform legislation by Senators Orrin Hatch (R-UT), Marco Rubio (R-FL), Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) and Chris Coons (D-DE). This legislation, which was included as part of the Senate gang of eight’s comprehensive immigration package, would establish a dedicated fund to promote STEM education in our nation's high schools and colleges. The legislation expands our current technology workforce and makes a long-term investment in a pipeline of home-grown STEM-educated workers to fill the tech jobs created throughout the country.

Virginia Senators Mark Warner and Tim Kaine were early supporters and co-sponsors of the I-Squared measure and voted for final Senate passage of the omnibus immigration reform bill in late June. That measure has not yet been sent to the House, where it appears there will be no broad “gang of eight” approach to legislation. According to leadership, the House will develop its own strategy to address immigration reform and will consider the issue on a step-by-step basis.

Of several related bills, the STEM Visa Act (SKILLS Act) co-introduced by Rep. Darrell Issa (R-CA) and Virginia's own Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R-VA) would nearly triple the visa cap for highly skilled and educated tech workers. By granting more skilled immigrants visas to enter this country, companies will be able to tap a new pool of qualified applicants for STEM jobs, helping to boost the economy and spark innovation.

Supporters of the SKILLS Act include Virginia Rep. Bob Goodlatte, who helped shepherd the measure through the House Judiciary committee which he chairs, and Rep. Randy Forbes (VA-4), who voted for the bill as a Judiciary committee member. Virginia Representative  
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and Majority Leader Eric Cantor, speaking from the floor of the House this week, called on the President to support passage of the SKILLS Act. The SKILLS Act awaits a vote by the full House of Representatives.

On the issue of “what to do” with those in this country illegally, let me suggest the following idea. This idea is predicated on the requirement that our borders be secured so that the flow of illegal aliens is dramatically reduced.

Let’s give the folks who are here illegally two options: Option one for the illegal resident is to go back to their home country, apply for a visa and stand in line along with millions of others in this world who dream of coming to the United States, making a new life for themselves and becoming US citizens. A fine may need to be paid for originally coming here illegally. All of these specifics can be worked out and those here illegally today will have a path to citizenship when they follow the rules. Option two for the illegal resident is to have a background check and if no problems show up, that person can become a legal resident, come out of the shadows, get a real job, pay taxes, hold his or her head high but they will never become a U.S. citizen. How to handle fines for coming here illegally, government assistance, etc will have to be worked out in the legislation but this will end the scourge of illegal residency and anyone coming into the country after those here are allowed legal residency, we not be offered this option. Those folks should be sent back to their home countries.

And for the children of illegal residents who came here with their parents, why should they be punished? If they qualify to be accepted at our state colleges and universities then they should not be required to pay out-of-state tuition. They should, however, be required to first attend two years of community college which would not take up seats for qualifying high school students who are current VA citizens in our four year colleges and universities. And in return for this “in-state tuition” option, these young people from other countries should be required to become US citizens while in those first two years of community college. That will mean some national changes are needed in our processing of these applicants, but that can and should be done.

Immigration reform is long overdue. It is much more than just what to do about those here illegally, although that is the emotional issue involved in all of this. These two ideas confront two of the major problems in the immigration reform debate and they should be among those itmes included in any legislation passed by Congress.

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