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VIEWPOINTS

Lead Editorial

Temporary-worker bill is vital to state economy

Opponents of the Arizona Temporary Worker Program say business just wants cheap labor.

We disagree.

This bill balances the state's tough employer-sanctions law with the recognition that Arizona businesses deserve a fair chance to get the workers they need.

This is a labor bill, not an immigration bill.

Workers would come here on a temporary basis, and their whereabouts could be monitored.

This bill imposes some order on the current chaos.

Like it or not, the crush of illegal immigration that has caused such misery for our state is basically a labor-delivery system. It is an ugly, unacceptable and unsustainable system that relies on criminal smugglers, who are a danger to migrants and the average citizen.

Illegal immigration continues because of federal inaction, and federal action would be necessary before the legal system Arizona hopes to substitute could take effect. But even if that federal approval does not materialize, passing this bill puts Arizona in a leadership position as states pressure Uncle Sam to do his job.

It puts Arizona on record demanding a legal framework to screen and monitor temporary workers so they, and the public, can be protected.

Why not just pursue enforcement strategies?

Because Arizona has a labor shortage.

The Arizona Chamber of Commerce and Industry and local chambers throughout the state support the bill for that reason. So do professional organizations representing agriculture, hospitality, restaurants, landscaping, manufacturing and construction.

These are not shadowy or disreputable operators seeking to oppress workers. These are

business people who have little to gain in the current anti-immigrant atmosphere by going on record in support of migrant labor.

They are supporting a bill that requires them to prove a labor shortage and pay the costs of obtaining temporary workers.

They are speaking up because the health of their businesses is at stake.

You should listen because the health of their businesses matters to Arizona's economy.

When businesses can't find workers, they downsize. For example, Sheridan Bailey of Ironco Enterprises lost "some of the best workers" as a result of the employer-sanctions law. He has had such a hard time replacing them that he worked out a deal to get some steel fabricating done in Tijuana. Outsourcing work to Mexico became the logical answer to a labor shortage in Arizona.

The workers Bailey could get through a temporary-worker program would buy food, rent apartments and pay taxes in Arizona. Those in Tijuana won't.

When industry can't find workers, economic pain ripples. Robert Shuler of the Western Growers Association calls Yuma a "significant and unique jewel" where huge amounts of the nation's winter vegetables are produced. But Arizona farms are shifting from labor-intensive vegetable crops to things like alfalfa because of labor shortages, says Joe Sigg of the Arizona Farm Bureau.

If a reliable workforce remains elusive, farms will move. Food crops will be grown and harvested by a foreign workforce in a foreign country. The United States will lose control of that segment of its food production. The Arizona businesses that sell and service the equipment for those farms will wither. So will the towns that sell food, clothing and entertainment to farmers and their workers.

Lawmakers vetted this temporary-worker bill. They were given a chance to question business leaders about the need. Sponsors Sen. Marsha Arzberger, D-Willcox, and Rep. Bill Konopnicki, R-Safford, made 17 changes in response to lawmakers' concerns. The bill won the support of leaders in both the Senate and House. The sponsors expected it to pass both Senate and House.

But some lawmakers decided they wanted more changes. Chief among them was Sen. Ron Gould, R-Lake Havasu City, who introduced 15 amendments.

These are hostile amendments.

One would require a worker to reimburse the state for the K-12 cost of educating his or her child. But this bill does not allow workers to bring their families, and work papers would be issued for only two years.

Another amendment would prohibit hiring a worker who is pregnant and require any worker who becomes pregnant to be terminated. This is contrary to federal law and highly discriminatory.

Another Gould amendment requires health coverage for temporary workers, which is a protection not mandated for all Arizona workers.

Gould has told his colleagues he will "not be a party to selling out the Arizona worker."

It's a snappy sound bite, but you have to dismiss the voices of some of the state's top business leaders to buy the idea that all employers want is cheap labor.

Arzberger plans a substitute amendment to incorporate some of Gould's concerns and those of other lawmakers. The most outlandish amendments cannot be accommodated, and Gould may force a vote on them. In the end, lawmakers will have to make a choice.

Do they act in the interest of helping the state - and the nation - move toward a realistic solution to labor shortages? Or do they buy into an argument that suggests Arizona's business leaders are just pretending they need workers?

Pay attention. What your elected representatives do will have an effect on the state's economic future.