

HISPANIC LINK

05/06/07

MARKETING IMMIGRATION REFORM AS PUBLIC POLICY

By José de la Isla

Hispanic Link News Service

HOUSTON — At a think-tank retreat in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in March, journalists, academics, documentary film producers and non-profit community advocates discussed how the U.S.-Mexico border is defined by one issue: immigration.

The fact is that only 19 percent of border residents are foreign-born, while it's 11 percent for the rest of the nation. The Annie E. Casey Foundation hosted the retreat, calling it "Beyond the Wall: Reframing 25 Years of Stereotypes," trying to find out how we got so narrow in our thinking about arguably the most dynamic border in the world.

Since those discussions, it has dawned on me that a reckoning approaches about whether we conceive ourselves as living in a small world or the real one.

The fact is water, drought, commerce, energy, minerals, irrigation farming, and economic and urban development are of paramount concerns affecting border residents in the modern Southwest.

But to follow the public discourse, real life has to stop dead in its tracks to allow the fear factor about "border security" to take over our thinking.

Last summer, for example, I witnessed U.S. Congressman Ted Poe (R-Texas) — after waking up from a nap — excoriate a bank president at a public hearing because he described Laredo as a pleasant community. The statement flew in the face of the cowering community the hearings wanted to portray because of crime issues across the border. The "facts," it seemed, needed to be made to fit the image.

During the Santa Fe meeting, I asked University of Texas journalism professor Mercedes Lynn de Uriarte why she thought immigration has become a virtual template over anything Latino-related. She said it's because we write so much about it. Imagery, repeated enough, has a way of making notions into beliefs, and sometimes bigger than life.

At the meeting, a lesson learned by the National Immigration Forum was put forward. Advocates, it seems, need to present arguments and solutions in a framework that unites communities along shared values and interests.

Furthermore, it is prudent to concentrate on the undecided 80 percent, if there are that many, instead of wasting time trying to convince the 20 percent with their minds already made up pro or con.

That's why, now that 78 percent of the general population already approves of some kind of path to legalization and citizenship for undocumented immigrants, this is a good time for Congress to act.

That's also why the message that Juan Hernández brought to a business group in Houston in late April felt like a pebble in my shoe. Hernández, U.S.-born and educated, held a Mexican Cabinet post under President Vicente Fox

expressly to improve relations between the home country and Mexicans living abroad. He is now promoting immigration reform as a private citizen.

He told me that Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) had mentioned to him she received thousands of e-mails from Minutemen opposing immigration reform. Latinos need to respond with millions of messages to Congress, he concluded.

Weren't last spring's demonstrations by the millions and the fall elections and the 78 percent who want some form of legalization already persuasive enough? After all, the Minutemen and their ilk lost decisively on this matter.

Apparently not. Congress has to be persuaded all over again.

Given that almost all congressional members are perpetually campaigning, do they want the rest of us to get involved in marathon public-sentiment campaigns to do what jillions of research reports, think tanks, experts and common sense suggest? Is this about a pacifier or about public policy?

Just pass the damn immigration reform (already a year late) and let's get on with other important work. Otherwise, petitioning government has become just a marketing gimmick. Public fatigue with the issue will further erode confidence in this government to get anything meaningful done.

We have to bring a semblance of reality back into perspective before more surreal images take over all of our thinking.

(José de la Isla is the author of "The Rise of Hispanic Political Power" and writes a weekly commentary for Hispanic Link News Service. E-mail joseisla3@yahoo.com.)

© 2007

END