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On March 27, the Prince William Committee of 100, a group that provides a “non-partisan, educational forum to study essential interests, problems and goals of the people of Prince William County, Manassas and Manassas Park,” hosted panelists from the local, state and federal level to discuss how the stimulus package will affect our county. Like the rest of America, local citizens want to know how politicians are working to ensure that national stimulus money will trickle down to our county to fund projects and create jobs.

Although immigration would seem to be a separate and distinct conversation from the current state of the economy, the opposite is quite true. As I noted in my column on March 12, studies show that not only do immigrant workers not replace native-born workers, but they actually create more jobs and increase salaries. Additionally, studies also show that foreign-born workers and their children pay more taxes than they receive in benefits from the state, federal and local governments.

With this in mind, it seems that we can’t afford to turn away the jobs, salary growth and taxes that immigrant workers bring — especially during this time of economic hardship when our personal and public coffers are running dry.

As reported in Business Week recently, current U.S. immigration policy and our lagging economy mean that fewer immigrants than in previous years are coming to the U.S., and many highly-skilled and less-skilled workers are returning back to their home countries. What seems clear is that American immigration policy and our weakened economy have discouraged both documented and undocumented workers from trying to remain in our country to work. This reverse migration seriously threatens the future economic health and, in many cases, the scientific competitiveness of our country.

In particular, a loss of skilled workers will negatively impact our nation’s ability to be a world technology leader. Many of our top technology companies, such as Google, eBay, Intel and Yahoo, were co-founded by immigrants. These are the kind of companies that bring jobs and prosperity to Americans. As Business Week reported, every year more than one million skilled professionals (engineers, scientists, doctors, researchers) and their families wait to be approved to receive one of only 120,000 permanent resident visas. The article emphasized how important these immigrants are to the growth and innovation of our economy. Of significance is that immigrants have started over half of Silicon Valley’s technology companies and contributed to more than 25 percent of our U.S. global patents.

Many argue that with so many Americans out of work, we should be trying to curb the tide of immigration anyway. Proponents of this view argue that unemployed American workers should be able to take back the jobs that have been filled by immigrants in recent years. Whether or not you agree with this view, the case of highly-skilled immigrants working in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) proposes an added dilemma. There may not be enough qualified Americans to fill these jobs.

Why aren't native-born Americans flocking to the often well-paying STEM field jobs in the first place? Last year, a Congressional Research Services report submitted to Congress found that the U.S. is currently not graduating a sufficient number of students, teachers, and practitioners in the STEM areas. Congress, state leaders, educators and philanthropists are working to correct the gap between the supply and demand for skilled professionals in the STEM fields. Local evidence of this progress can be seen at the thriving Howard Hughes Medical Institute, headquartered in Chevy Chase, Maryland with a large campus in Ashburn, Virginia. This non-profit medical research organization has made investments of more than \$8.3 billion for the support, training and education of the nation's most creative and promising scientists.

While our country strives to produce more native-born leaders in the STEM fields, there is a compelling need for foreign-born workers to fill our STEM jobs. In order to attract and retain the best talent from other nations, the president and Congress need to reform our immigration system to make it easier for these top innovators to stay in the U.S. and help to rebuild the economy through their important work. The alternative is that we will lose these vital professionals to countries that are only too happy to welcome their skills and economic contributions. In that we have a need for their talent, why let them go elsewhere to compete with us?

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