



Los Angeles Area  
Chamber of Commerce

**TUESDAY | Mar. 28, 2006**

THE BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE:

# Si, Se Puede... Reform Immigration



## Coming up at the Chamber

[View all upcoming events on our web calendar.](#)

**TUE | March 28**  
Referral Network  
[more info](#)

**TUE | April 4**  
Trade Briefing: Doing  
Business with China  
[more info](#)

**THU | April 6**  
L.A. Youth at Work  
Employer Breakfast  
[more info](#)

**TUE | April 11**  
International Mixer  
[more info](#)

**TUE | April 11**  
Referral Network  
[more info](#)

**FRI | April 14**  
Health Care  
Committee Meeting  
[more info](#)

**TUE | April 18**  
Principal for a Day  
[more info](#)

**WED | April 19**  
International Trade and  
Investments Committee  
Meeting  
[more info](#)

**THU | April 20**  
Export Seminar Series #4:  
International Matchmaking  
[more info](#)

**THU | April 20**  
Land Use, Construction and  
Housing Committee Meeting  
[more info](#)

**FRI | April 21**  
Accenture Pancakes &  
Politics  
[more info](#)

**WED | April 26**  
Environmental Quality  
Committee Meeting  
[more info](#)

**WED | April 26**  
Transportation and Goods  
Movement Policy Committee  
[more info](#)

The Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce is the voice of business in L.A. County. Founded in 1888, the Chamber promotes a prosperous economy and quality of life in the Los Angeles region. For more information, visit [www.lachamber.org](http://www.lachamber.org)

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When more than half a million Angelenos come together to protest an issue, as they did this past weekend, it commands attention.

As we all know by now, the issue is immigration reform--specifically, HR 4437, a bill that the U.S. House of Representatives has passed. It would make felons out of 12 million undocumented residents and instruct law enforcement to seek them out. It would cut federal funding for cities--some in California--that have sanctuary laws. It would also create a 700-mile wall along our Mexican border.

Immigration is an issue that inspires passionate and oftentimes uncivil debate. At the same time, it is a debate we must have--although I hope it becomes less contentious than what we see on television and hear on talk radio.

No matter how you slice it, nearly all of our families came from somewhere else at some point in our nation's history. Some of us came voluntarily, others to escape religious or political persecution, and some were brought to America against their will.

In the modern era, most immigrants come to this country for economic opportunity. Our economy, particularly California's, is largely dependent on immigrant labor and has been for more than a century. Historically, one only has to think of the construction of the railroads and California's ascent to be the world's agricultural leader. Today, we still depend on immigrants to harvest our state's crops, care for our children and elderly, and build our homes.

Much of our immigrant labor exists in the underground economy, with approximately 680,000 workers in the greater L.A. area, many of whom are unskilled, according to a 2005 study by the Milken Institute and Economic Roundtable. "Valued at an estimated \$8 billion a year, the underground economy costs the state of California, the city of Los Angeles and federal authorities some \$2 billion in unpaid contributions," the study reports.

As business people, we are extremely interested in opportunities for immigrants to own businesses, and for them to be customers as well. I believe most Americans respect immigrants who come here to work and play by the rules. They come here seeking a better life for themselves and their families. Who can blame them for that?

However, so many are coming illegally, and we must confront the problems that result. Those in this category often do not pay taxes and become a drain on our economy, our infrastructure, and our social services. If they bear children in this country, the offspring are considered American citizens under the 15th Amendment.

Given the breadth of the immigrant issue, which no longer impacts only border states in the south, we need to think HR 4437 through. Assuming that the federal government could even enforce new labor laws, do we really want to immediately name 12 million of our neighbors, customers and employees felons? Many are productive members of our communities who make contributions every day to make our region a better place. Would enforcement mean increased racial profiling to track down individuals thought to be illegal? And from an economic standpoint, will our employers be able to fill many of these jobs or at least afford to hire those here legally?

I do not condone breaking the law, but let's face it--many of our state's top economic producers rely on immigrant labor to turn a profit and keep consumer prices low. After all, the market dictates the economy, and if Americans were willing to take these jobs, they would have done so already, rather than creating an opportunity for immigrant labor.

Yesterday, the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee approved legislation that includes legalization for undocumented immigrants. This week, leaders from both houses of Congress are meeting to try to craft a compromise immigration reform bill. National security is critical and should always be the priority issue when it comes to border control--as should the perhaps conflicting priorities of a strong economy, protection against racial profiling, and an overall respect for the law, which those here illegally--and those enforcing it--have often ignored.

It's a tough issue, but one we must deal with now--fairly, even-handedly, and with compassion.

And that's *The Business Perspective*.

*The Business Perspective* is an award-winning weekly opinion column by Rusty Hammer, President & CEO, L.A. Area Chamber

## L.A. Business THIS WEEK

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