A bipartisan group of Senate negotiators last week announced an immigration reform compromise on which debate began this week. The legislation would grant temporary legal status to most of the 12 million illegal immigrants in the country, while allowing them to apply for residence visas and eventual citizenship. For Californians, especially in our region, immigration reform is a top domestic priority.

Of the state’s 37 million residents, 26 percent are immigrants. In L.A. County, 36 percent are immigrants and in the City of L.A. the percentage jumps to 41 percent. Indeed, 29 percent of all the immigrants living in the United States are in California.

A guest-worker program would allow as many as 600,000 migrants into the country each year, but they would have to leave after two years. The current visa system, which stresses family ties, would be augmented by a point system that would favor skilled, educated workers. Most of these changes would take effect only after the implementation of tough new border controls and a crackdown on the employment of undocumented workers. Fines, fees, background checks and heightened administrative controls would be parts of the new system as well.

The proposal came under immediate fire from all corners of the political spectrum. “The answers are not simple or easy,” said Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) in response. You can only imagine the give-and-take that was required to garner the support of President George Bush, Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), Sen. Kennedy and the other participants in this bipartisan group. But the group was persistent, as Sen. Mel Martinez (R-Fla.) said, “This is a problem that begs for an answer.”

Just over a year ago, Rusty Hammer, my predecessor at the L.A. Area Chamber, wrote a Business Perspective on this issue when Congress was considering a punitive immigration reform bill. Here is an excerpt from what Rusty said:

Immigration inspires passionate and uncivil debate. 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 California’s economy it 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.

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?

I do not condone breaking the law, but let’s face it, if U.S. citizens were willing to take these jobs, they would have already, so immigrant labor is there to fill the void.

Leaders from both houses of Congress are meeting to try to craft a compromise immigration reform bill. It’s a tough issue, but one that we must deal with now—fairly, even-handedly and compassionately.

The status quo is not an acceptable alternative for California or the United States. The bipartisan proposal that is on the table provides the best starting point available.

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.

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