

Editorial / Immigration Fees; Paying more for a dream

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Body

Bush administration plans to increase the application **fees** for legal **immigration** are not without merit. But the size of the increases after Congress failed to pass **immigration** reform sends entirely the wrong message.

The **fee** increases - some by as much as 80 percent - belie the praiseworthy speeches President Bush has made, even in the face of opposition from within his own party, on the need for this country to be **more** welcoming to immigrants.

"One of the fabulous things about our country is that our soul has constantly been renewed by people seeking the American **Dream**, people coming here to work to realize their **dream**, people wanting to raise a family in the United States of America," Bush said last year in Mission, Texas.

But these increased **fees** will put the **dream** on hold, if not out of reach, for many immigrant families.

The application **fee** for permanent legal status will increase to \$905 from \$325. The citizenship application **fee** will rise to \$595 from \$330, a hike of 80 percent. A family of four seeking citizenship would have to **pay** \$2,380. That's steep. The average annual income for many Latin American immigrant households in this country is less than \$25,000.

Citizenship and **Immigration** Services director Emilio Gonzalez makes a good case for **more** money. Virtually all of its budget comes from **fees**. It needs cash to digitize an old paper-based records system and to make other service improvements.

Application backlogs have delayed citizenship to too many. But if this is a nation that beckons immigrants, should they be saddled with all of the cost to improve the bureaucracy that processes their applications?

Congress has not been able to agree on **immigration** reform legislation. But stronger measures have been taken in recent months to combat illegal **immigration**. National Guard units have been sent to assist the U.S. Border Patrol. Raids seeking illegal immigrants have been conducted at meatpacking plants. **Immigration** officers are monitoring jails to deport undocumented immigrants arrested for local crimes.

All of that is fine. Lawbreakers should be prosecuted. The government also should **more** aggressively go after companies that knowingly hire illegal immigrants to exploit their willingness to work long hours for low **pay** in grueling jobs.

But those persons following the proper process to U.S. citizenship deserve a helping hand, not another financial hardship that will discourage many from going the legal route to stay in this country.

The new fees won't become effective for another four months. Perhaps in that time, Congress, which has found more money for border enforcement, can find a way to modernize Citizenship and Immigration Services without raising application fees so high immigrant families can't afford to pay them.

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