

Honda introduces bill that would make sweeping changes in legal immigration

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Body

To ensure that issues involving legal immigration don't get lost in the fiery debate about illegal immigration, Silicon Valley Congressman Mike Honda today will introduce a bill that would give green-card holders the same rights as citizens to bring their spouses and children to the U.S.

The wide-ranging legislation, which already has about 50 House co-sponsors and the support of powerful groups such as the NAACP and the Anti-Defamation League, is expected to help build momentum for "comprehensive immigration reform" this year. Two years ago, a reform bill collapsed in Congress amid criticism that it was an "amnesty bill" for undocumented immigrants.

Honda's bill also includes a controversial provision to allow gays and lesbians to sponsor the immigration of same-sex "permanent partners." That issue gained traction recently when immigration authorities tried to deport a lesbian mother from Pacifica to the Philippines.

The law would also increase numerical caps on the number of visas for countries such as Mexico, the Philippines, China and India. People from those countries hoping to immigrate to the U.S. routinely face waits of more than a decade in a system with a backlog of 5.8 million people.

"We're a nation that believes in family values, so to say this is not important to talk about means" that some politicians and activists "are talking out of both sides of their mouths," Honda, D-Campbell, said Wednesday.

But opposing groups argue that the number of immigrants permitted to come to the U.S. each year roughly a million is already too high. They are vowing to fight the proposals as strongly as they have fought amnesty for illegal immigrants.

Enough people to fill "a new San Jose are moving to the United States every single year," said Ira Mehlman of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, or FAIR.

"These kind of numbers have an impact on schools, health care and every institution in the country an impact lost on people in Congress like Rep. Honda," Mehlman said. "All of these proposals seem to disregard the fact that we now have 9 percent unemployment in this country."

Shrewd move

But Paul Donnelly, a longtime pro-immigration activist and lobbyist in Washington, D.C., said "Honda has done a very shrewd thing here."

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"**Legal immigration** tends to be left out of the **immigration** debate because the elephant in the room is legalization of undocumented immigrants," he said. "But here's a comprehensive list of things that need to be fixed. It's the right debate to have."

Honda's bill, Donnelly said, will complement another recently **introduced bill** by Sen. Robert Menendez, D-New Jersey, which is supported by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid. That **bill** did not contain the same-sex provision, which is being debated separately in another **bill** by Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vermont. The various **bills** are expected to reach the floors of the two houses by the fall.

Vivek Jayanand of Santa Clara said he is happy that an issue that so deeply affects him will soon be taken up by Congress. He is among a group of more than a million **legal**, permanent U.S. residents forced to live without their spouses and in many cases their children. These green-card holders often wait five to seven years for their immediate family members to come to the United States.

Jayanand, a 32-year-old hardware engineer at Marvell Semiconductor, married his wife, an Indian physician, in February 2007. He said the earliest she will be allowed to come is the end of 2010, after Jayanand becomes a citizen unless the "incredibly frustrating" law is **changed** before then.

Such waits are intolerable in a society that believes in fairness and in families, **Honda** and pro-**immigration** activists contend.

"The nation's strongest family units are immigrant families," he said. "When we talk about the tapestry of our country and its fabric," **immigration** helps "weave us tighter together."

Fear of fraud

Groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union and gay rights organizations praised the provision allowing the **immigration** of "permanent partners" defined as someone 18 years or older in a "committed, intimate relationship" in which both parties "intend a lifelong commitment."

"It's very exciting," said Judy Rickard, who recently retired from San Jose State University because she couldn't sponsor her partner of four years, a Briton, for **immigration**. "She's only allowed to visit in the U.S. for six months at a time, so we are probably going to have to live in another country."

But groups like FAIR and the Washington, D.C.-based Center for **Immigration** Studies say such a policy would be an open invitation to fraud, in addition to letting the culture wars be played out in **immigration** policy.

Massachusetts, Iowa, Connecticut, Vermont, Maine and (as of Wednesday) New Hampshire now permit gay marriage. But the issue is still being fiercely fought in California and other states.

"Our view is that until we have determined what constitutes a marriage, **immigration** policy should stay out of social policy," said FAIR's Mehlman.

Honda said he realizes that "some people wince when they see that provision because they know it's going to be a tough dialogue," he said. "But I think it's based on the principal of doing the right thing."

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"Recapture" unused family-based and employment-based visas previously allocated by Congress. Allow green-card holders to reunite with their spouses and minor children by classifying them as "immediate relatives." Increase the per-country limits of family and employment-based visas. Allow orphans, widows and widowers to **immigrate** despite the death of a petitioner. Give the attorney general greater flexibility to address numerous hardships, including family separation, caused by a provision that bars, for up to 10 years, individuals who had been illegally in the United States. Give priority to children of World War II Filipino veterans by exempting them from the numerical caps on visas. Allow citizens to bring same-sex "permanent partners" to the U.S.

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Source: Office of Rep. Mike Honda

Graphic

Rep. Mike Honda: We re a nation that believes in family values.

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