

Sky-high fees discourage citizenship; SOCIETY SHOULD SUPPORT IMMIGRATION SERVICES

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Body

The numbers are jarring. Instead of \$325 to apply for a "green card," the bill would soar to \$905 under a Bush administration proposal. Citizenship application fees, now \$330, would nearly double.

With a national consensus to curb illegal immigration, the government should be making it easier, not harder, to go the legal route. It makes sense to ask immigrants to pay more for better service, but it's counterproductive to raise rates to a level that discourages people from applying.

Fortunately, Rep. Zoe Lofgren is injecting some Silicon Valley wisdom into this plan. The San Jose Democrat and chair of the House Judiciary subcommittee on immigration is calling for a congressional hearing to sort things out.

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services has an abysmal performance record, with long waits for rulings and an attitude toward applicants that is less than customer-friendly. The Bush administration says the fees would bring in \$1 billion a year to update software, expand facilities and train workers.

We'll believe the improvements when we see them. But we're more concerned about an underlying principle.

General taxes on the public once were the way we financed government services. Today, nobody wants to talk about higher taxes, so we rely more and more on fees paid by individuals or businesses that deal with government offices. They're the ones who benefit, the theory goes. The immigration agency today is funded entirely by fees.

In some cases, fee-for-service government works. As one example, drug companies are willing to pay the Food and Drug Administration higher fees to get quicker rulings on new products. On the local level, developers often are willing to pay higher fees for quick decisions on permits. In these businesses, delay is costly, so speed is worth some extra expense.

But the fee rationale goes only so far, and the complex issue of immigration shows why.

Expediting green card and citizenship paperwork isn't just in the interest of the applicants. It's a goal of society. If we want to discourage illegal border crossings, legal residency has to be a realistic goal. And if Congress finally agrees on an overdue program to give longtime, undocumented residents a path to citizenship, it can't be only for the rich. Saving up \$300 for a green card is hard enough for a struggling parent. But close to \$1,000? It might as well be \$1 million.

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Waves of immigrants have enriched this country like no other. In Silicon Valley, countless tech start-ups and small businesses list immigrants as their founders. An orderly system of immigration is in everyone's interest.

If it's clear that the immigration agency will make good use of additional money, then all taxpayers should share the cost with applicants. Society will reap the benefits.

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