

Welcome to America: An economic stimulus plan

Written by Roger Dow
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From the natural beauty of the Grand Canyon to the whimsical ingenuity of Disney World's Magic Kingdom, the United States is a land of world-class attractions. But it isn't always easy for foreign travelers to get here. Too often, a cumbersome U.S. visa process has encouraged travelers from countries such as Brazil and China to spend their money at other international destinations.

Now, however, President Obama has unveiled a major initiative to streamline the visa process and welcome travelers to the United States. For the first time, the United States will have a national strategy to make America the top destination for travelers worldwide.

With the Magic Kingdom castle as a backdrop, President Obama told travelers from around the world, "We want to welcome you." He signed an executive order calling for expanded "trusted traveler" programs, faster visa processing, and a government-wide initiative to welcome visitors to the United States.

This announcement couldn't come at a better time. International travel can and should play a crucial role in boosting U.S. GDP and creating much-needed jobs. Travelers come here, spend money, fuel local businesses, don't consume public resources, and return home to tell their friends what a great time they had in the United States.

Yet America has been losing ground in the global competition to attract international travelers. Between 2000 and 2010, America's share of the international travel market fell from 17 percent to 12.4 percent.

If the United States had held onto that 17 percent market share over the past decade, 78 million more travelers would have contributed \$606 billion in additional U.S. GDP and supported 467,000 more American jobs.

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If we recaptured that 17 percent share, it's estimated America would see 1.3 million new jobs and an increase in additional economic output of \$859 billion by 2020.

One of the biggest obstacles, which the president's executive order addresses directly, has been a cumbersome and outdated visa application process. Now, potential visitors who pose no conceivable danger to the United States, especially from such booming "emerging markets" as Brazil and China, will be able to obtain visas more quickly and with less difficulty. Travelers from Taiwan will join those from 36 countries who are able to come to the United States under the Visa Waiver Program, which means they need only present a valid passport to gain admission to the United States.

In too many countries, the U.S. simply hasn't had the presence it needs to meet demand. For example, in China, with a population of 1.3 billion, consular services have been available in only five cities. That leaves 20 cities with populations of two million or more without a U.S. consulate. Compare that to the U.K., which offers consular services in 12 Chinese cities - and the U.K. doesn't even require an in-person interview for its visa applications.

The result? Lost economic activity for the United States. In Europe, the number of Brazilian visitors increased by 163 percent once they no longer had to obtain visas in order to gain entry. Our failure to offer Brazilians similar access has cost the U.S. an estimated \$5 billion.

Sixty five percent of travelers to the United States currently come under the Visa Waiver Program. Expanding the program to include countries such as Poland, Chile, Argentina and Brazil would have a dramatic economic impact.

The president's announcement is a huge step toward a more welcoming United States as destination for international travelers. His initiative will rightly garner bipartisan support, as a robust travel industry benefits all Americans.

Now, it's Congress's turn. It's time to take up recently introduced legislation that directs the State Department to develop accurate visa demand projections and a consular officer hiring plan to meet a 12-day maximum standard for visa processing.

Other worthwhile proposals to expand access include the use of videoconferencing technology for visa interviews, longer visa terms and expedited processing for travelers willing to pay a premium.

For the United States, international travelers represent "free money." With a small investment in improving their access, we could reap a huge return.

Roger Dow is President and Chief Executive Officer of the U.S. Travel Association, the national umbrella organization representing all segments of the U.S. travel and tourism industry.