

THE CARY NEWS

Local advocates push for immigration reform

By Paul A. Specht

June 11, 2014

MORRISVILLE — Some immigrants who have the skills to work in high-tech jobs in western Wake County and Research Triangle Park are going elsewhere because of current restrictions on work visas, according to Morrisville Town Councilman Steve Rao.

Rao and Partnership for a New American Economy, a national group in favor of immigration reform, hosted a panel discussion in Morrisville on Monday. The goal was to highlight how an easier path to immigration could help the Triangle by potentially creating thousands of jobs.

The event focused on a report by the advocacy group that says the Triangle is among the U.S. metro areas most affected by current procedures for an immigrant to become a U.S. citizen or acquire a work visa.

The report says 1,112 visa applicants in the Raleigh-Durham area were denied H-1B visas between 2007 and 2008. An H-1B visa allows U.S. employers to hire foreign workers in highly specialized fields such as research and technology.

Current laws restrict the government from granting more than 85,000 H-1B visas per year.

The cap is leading to a “brain drain” in places like New York, Washington, California and even Cary and Morrisville, Rao said.

“Many of (these workers) have been in technology, bio-tech and life sciences working on great innovations,” he said. “But some of them have actually left for countries that have more open (immigration) policies.”

The panel discussion attracted about two dozen people, most of them advocates for reform who sought to learn more about how the current system affects the Triangle.

John Faison is the director of Centro Internacional de Raleigh, a group that attempts to connect immigrants to faith-based organizations in North Carolina. Faison said he believes there’s a moral argument for immigration reform, but he wanted to learn more about how it affects employers.

He said he was appalled by the report’s claim that visa denials nullified as many as 2,557 tech jobs since 2008.

“It’s ridiculous that we have employers who want workers here ... and we say, ‘You can’t come,’” he said, referring to the cap on certain visas.

The push for immigration reform is mostly led by Democrats but has gained support from a handful of Republicans such as Rep. Renee Ellmers, who represents much of western Wake County.

Kevin LeCount, a director for the State Employees Association of North Carolina, attended the event and called Ellmers “courageous” for supporting reform efforts despite receiving criticism from her own party.

Others such as Rep. George Holding, a Raleigh Republican, argue that America needs to secure its southern border before overhauling the immigration structure.

In a statement released by his office, Holding said he looks forward “to playing an active role in the coming discussions” about specific issues such as visas for high-skilled workers.

In the meantime, reform advocates point to the economic benefits of immigration reform in an attempt to woo critics.

Rao and the partnership invited policy analyst Alex Nowrasteh of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank, to Morrisville.

Nowrasteh said immigrants are more likely than Americans to pursue jobs in the science and math fields, are less likely to commit violent crimes and are less likely than poor Americans to take advantage of welfare programs.

He referred to the current system as a “bureaucratic nightmare” that prevents the economy from growing.

“If you support free markets, if you support the idea that a free-market economy is the best system that increases wealth ... then you have to support a more liberalized and open immigration policy,” Nowrasteh said.