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**As Good as Advertised**

**Reps. Bill Delahunt (D-Mass.) and Jon Porter (R-Nev.) Op – Ed**

When it comes to welcoming overseas travelers, the United States is losing ground to every other developed nation, and the result has been disastrous.

Overseas travel to the United States has decreased nearly 20 percent since Sept. 11, 2001. This decline has cost the United States \$94 billion in visitor spending, \$15.6 billion in tax receipts, \$26 billion in payroll and an estimated 194,000 jobs.

The entire country is feeling the pain. According to a recent report released by the Office of Travel and Tourism Industries, Boston, for example, has experienced a 25 percent decline in overseas travelers; Chicago, 21 percent; and Miami, 33 percent.

The decline is felt in all sectors, not just tourism. Fewer international students are attending American universities. Conferences, trade shows and scientific meetings are relocating to other countries. Buyers are turning to more accessible markets.

In response to these alarming trends, we, together with dozens of our colleagues, introduced the Travel Promotion Act of 2007. The bill would establish a travel promotion campaign funded equally by a fee on overseas travelers and contributions from the U.S. travel industry — so it would come at no cost to American taxpayers. The effort would be run by an independent, nonprofit corporation, and would be a nationally coordinated, public-private partnership to explain clearly U.S. security policies, improve perceptions of the U.S. travel process and promote the United States as a premier travel destination.

The Travel Promotion Act, combined with strategic U.S. visa and entry reforms, will bring billions of dollars into the United States economy and create hundreds of thousands of jobs. The legislation will also strengthen America's image abroad. According to a survey of 2,000 international travelers conducted by the Discover America Partnership, those who have visited the United States are 74 percent more likely to have a favorable opinion of the country. More than 60 percent of respondents said that visiting the United States would make them more likely to support America's policies in the world.

Some have argued that the travel industry should run a promotional program on its own. However, this argument ignores the fact that the greatest deterrents to visiting the United States today are misperceptions of the American entry

experience and a lack of information on American security policies. The purpose of a nationally coordinated program is to communicate policies accurately, provide a brand for the country, and enhance the nation's competitiveness by creating a bigger playing field on which individual destinations can compete. Only the United States government can do this.

Unlike government-sponsored marketing programs for commodities such as beef or milk, travel promotion does not benefit any one business, state or region — it benefits the entire country. The economic windfall of the \$4,000 overseas travelers spend, on average, per-person extends to the dry cleaner, the mom-and-pop convenience store and the cab driver. That's why nearly every other developed nation promotes itself to international travelers. It's time that America do the same.

The United States placed many reasonable security barriers on international inbound travel following the events of Sept. 11. Those barriers had the predictable effect of deterring travel to the United States. The time has come to balance necessary security measures with clear communications and an aggressive, pro-American (business-like) effort to compete for visitors. The Travel Promotion Act creates the public-private partnership necessary to match the efforts of competitor nations that are spending hundreds of millions of dollars to attract the visitors that should be coming to America. It's time to put America back in the lead.

*Delahunt is chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights and Oversight. Porter is a member of the House Ways and Means Committee.*