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Nation Needs Program to Lure Foreign Travelers
Roger Dow Op-Ed

There's a saying in politics that this year's presidential candidates are no doubt keeping in mind — perception is everything. But it's not just politics where perception matters — take a look at today's mortgage crisis, your favorite Hollywood celebrity or the troubling trend of declining travel from overseas visitors. Despite the fact that the U.S. is currently a world travel bargain full of wonderful destinations and people, overseas travel has plummeted by 17 percent since 2000.

America is a welcoming nation, and Americans are welcoming people — we all know that. Unfortunately, the perception around the world is not consistent with this reality. Necessary post-9/11 security measures have made America safer, but often perceived as barriers, these policies have also deterred millions of overseas travelers from visiting our country. The 17 percent decline in overseas visitors to the United States since 9/11 has cost America nearly \$100 billion in lost visitor spending and nearly 200,000 jobs. While a weak dollar may attract some visitors, the U.S. Department of Commerce only projects a 1 percent increase in overseas travel to the United States from 2000 to 2010.

When asked why they are choosing not to visit the United States, students, businesspeople, tourists and others invariably speak of negative perceptions of the U.S. entry process. Two-thirds of international travelers are worried that they will be detained for hours because of a simple mistake or misstatement at a U.S. airport, and more of those travelers are concerned about U.S. immigration officials (70 percent) than the threat of crime or terrorism (54 percent) when visiting the United States. While it is common to point the finger at the war in Iraq for deterring visitors, it is the perceived battle of getting a visa or through an American airport that is doing the most damage.

International press accounts that portray the U.S. entry process as difficult and unwelcoming have further exacerbated the problem. On a daily basis, the foreign press recounts the story of an individual or group that got turned away at an American airport, stood in a three-hour-long Customs line or was treated rudely by an American official. Whether these stories are true or not no longer matters. Because America has let every charge go unanswered, the stories have taken on a life of their own — a life in which even the worst of horror stories are taken at face value.

The private sector — by itself — is not capable of refuting these stories, explaining America's frequently changing security policies or convincing travelers

that America wants their business. If we desire more visitors in today's environment, the federal government must be a partner.

The Travel Promotion Act, currently under consideration in Congress, would create a nationally coordinated campaign to promote travel to the United States and communicate U.S. visitor entry and security policies. This campaign would be funded by the private sector and a modest fee paid by travelers from countries enrolled in the Visa Waiver Program — a fee similar to what American travelers pay to travel to other countries around the world.

The travel promotion program would not require a penny from American taxpayers, but it is American taxpayers and the American economy that would reap the benefits. Oxford Economics projects that a \$100 million travel promotion program would yield millions of new visitors each year, \$8 billion in new visitor spending and \$850 million in new federal tax revenue — at no cost to American taxpayers.

A national travel promotion campaign may not have been necessary before 9/11, but it is critically needed today to reverse negative perceptions that have unnecessarily deterred overseas travelers from experiencing all our country has to offer.

Overseas travel brings great economic and goodwill benefits to America, and we cannot afford to ignore these negative perceptions and hope they will reverse themselves. Something must be done.

Congress acted swiftly last year to enact a series of reforms to streamline the visitors' visa and entry system and modernize America's major ports of entry, while at the same time improving security. But travel promotion legislation still awaits approval. This is critical legislation that must be passed into law this year.

From Dubai to London to Beijing, international travelers have options. They also have other countries competing for their business. It is time for America to get into the game. The perception is that we no longer welcome travelers with open arms. Without the Travel Promotion Act, that perception will become a sad reality.

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