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Calvo: With labor shortage, buildup 'not going to happen'

Alana Chargualaf | The Guam Daily Post 15 hrs ago



'POSSIBILITY OF SUCCESS?': Guest speaker Gov. Eddie Calvo delivers a speech at a Guam Contractors Association meeting at the Hyatt Regency Guam on Sept. 20. Alana Chargualaf/The Guam Daily Post

"It would be crazy if they did not solve this issue by the end of the year. It would be crazy."

– Gov. Eddie Calvo

Gov. Eddie Calvo yesterday said billions of dollars in military construction projects on Guam, as well as Guam residents' ability to afford building a home of their own, are on the line as Guam continues to deal with a shortage of skilled construction workers.

"This buildup is not going to happen with the workers we have now," the governor said.

The governor was the guest speaker yesterday at a Guam Contractors Association meeting, and shared his recent meetings in Washington, D.C., concerning Guam's still-unsuccessful attempts to reverse federal immigration authorities' near-100 percent rejection rate of petitions to hire temporary foreign workers on H-2B visas.

Calvo said after years of not getting face-to-face meetings with Cabinet-level federal officials during President Barack Obama's administration, he finally had a recent meeting with Department of Homeland Security acting Secretary Elaine Duke and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services acting Director James McCament at DHS headquarters in Washington,

among other top officials of different federal departments and agencies.

'Finally, they're listening'

They discussed possible solutions that DHS may consider that would allow reasonable access to the H-2B worker program and provide relief to Guam's contractors, according to the governor's office.

"These are the folks that I've been writing letters to, and they've been getting rougher and rougher and more blunt," Calvo said of his earlier efforts to contact federal officials. Now, he said, "finally, they're listening."

During the Q&A portion of the contractor group's meeting, Calvo's voice intensified as he answered a question about the likelihood of success on Guam's efforts to get more workers for the plan to build a Marine Corps base in Finegayan, Dededo, near Andersen Air Force Base.

"The possibility of success? If they don't change ... this buildup is not going to happen with the workers we have now. Period," Calvo said. "It would be crazy if they did not solve this issue by the end of the year. It would be crazy."

The governor said Guam has about 6,000 people in the construction industry, which is a fraction of what Calvo said it needs to be. More are needed for civilian and military construction projects.

He said he had met with James Freeze, director of Securitas Critical

Infrastructure Services, a private consulting firm. The firm describes itself as being in the business of helping to "improve the protection of the personnel, programs, resources and facilities of our clients."

Calvo said he shared information about Guam's foreign-worker program, and how slave labor isn't occurring on the island.

The governor said he also discussed with Freeze that bringing in thousands of workers from the continental United States would be very difficult, especially given the rebuilding of hurricane-devastated Texas and Florida. He said it's a fallacy to think Guam can source the majority of its labor needs from the U.S. mainland.

"All the issues that we've brought up regarding American workforce and slave labor, these misconceptions that are occurring so far away, he found that we gave him the necessary information to show Guam has no issues on either area," said Calvo.

'The rules don't apply? It's wrong'

Calvo also discussed legislation working its way through Congress that could help ease the labor shortage for military construction projects, but not construction for the average Guam resident who wants to build a house.

"We have a bill that will allow foreign workers – H-2Bs – to work within our (military bases), but when Joe and Maria Cruz want to build a house, somebody wants to build an apartment, or a hospital trying to build a labor

and delivery room, the rules don't apply? It's wrong."

He voiced hope a solution for Guam's labor challenges will be coming from Washington.

"I think finally things are coming to a head," the governor said. "I really do believe that things are going to take a turn. The problem now is, the turn is not good enough."

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