

OUR VIEW: Stop rejecting almost all of Guam's H-2B applications

Pacific Daily News 7:18 p.m. ChT March 15, 2017



(Photo: PDN file photo)

The decision by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services to deny almost all H-2B labor applications for Guam is proving disastrous for our community and must be reversed.

Federal officials have said Guam businesses have misused the program — which is intended to provide temporary foreign labor — by relying on large numbers of foreign workers for years at a time.

The decision has made it more expensive, and more difficult, to build homes on Guam. The cost of building a house has doubled — from about \$100 a square foot to about \$200 a square foot within the past three months. Some construction companies are rejecting requests for new home builds and residential projects. Others are

considering bankruptcy.

“My personal opinion is that the construction industry will collapse,” said Bernie Maranan, owner of BME and Sons Inc. “Even if we escalate our costs, how can you get a project without any workers?”

The island has a limited labor pool, especially in the construction industry. If there's a shortage of construction workers in a state the U.S. mainland, workers will move there, even if temporarily, to fill in the gaps. On Guam, those gaps have been, and must continue to be, filled by foreign workers.

In October 2016, 12 Guam companies heavily reliant on foreign labor filed a federal lawsuit against U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, demanding immediate relief. While the possibility of a settlement was floated in January, nothing has happened yet.

If the federal government thinks some businesses have been exploiting the H-2B program, it should act against those businesses only. It's not just unfair to apply a punitive action to all of Guam, it also has the potential to cripple the island's economy and make it prohibitively expensive to buy a home.

The federal government needs to end its near 100-percent rejection rate of H-2B applications for Guam.

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