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TODAY'S TALKER

Arizona businesses push for immigration reform

Carla Brandt's Phoenix stucco firm is part of a group of Arizona businesses running ads on radio and cable television beginning today to drum up support for comprehensive immigration reform that includes a temporary-worker program.

The group, Arizona Employers for Immigration Reform, says a temporary-worker program is needed to offset a labor shortage that prevents many Arizona businesses from growing. Critics say there is no shortage, and businesses would be able to find enough American workers if they paid more.

The monthlong \$30,000 campaign is timed to coincide with the immigration debate scheduled to begin Tuesday in the U.S. Senate.

Political debate continues, B7.



Businesses seek reforms to ease worker deficit

By Daniel González
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Carla Brandt employs 50 workers at her commercial stucco company in Phoenix, but she could use more.

She has tried running ads and raising wages. But she either gets no response or those who show up aren't qualified.

As a result, Brandt says, she turns down more business.

"We haven't been able to grow in years," said Brandt, owner of Cobra Stucco.

That is why Brandt is among more than 100 Arizona business owners who have banded together to push lawmakers to pass comprehensive immigration reform that includes a temporary-worker program.

Today, Arizona Employers for Immigration Reform will launch a radio and television campaign aimed at drumming

up public support for a temporary-worker program. Brandt is a featured business owner.

The ads are timed to the start of a debate on immigration reform in the Senate next week, said Farrell Quinlan, the group's spokesman.

After months of talks, however, efforts by Democrat and Republican lawmakers to reach a compromise faltered Thursday, threatening to scuttle the best chance to overhaul the nation's immigration system this year.

The group is spending more than \$30,000 on the month-long campaign. Ads will run mostly on news talk radio stations and cable news channels.

Quinlan said businesses are afraid that if Congress doesn't pass a bill this summer, it won't happen at all because the presidential race will make a compromise virtually impossible.

"We can't wait," Quinlan said. "The situation has gotten so out of hand."

The federal government last year stepped up workplace raids and for the first time began pursuing criminal charges against employers suspected of knowingly hiring illegal workers. Local governments in Arizona and around the country are passing laws aimed at cracking down on employers of illegal workers. On Tuesday, Oklahoma Gov. Brad Henry signed a bill aimed at preventing undocumented immigrants from getting jobs.

The Arizona House this year overwhelmingly passed an employer sanctions bill that would impose fines and license suspensions on employers who knowingly hire illegal workers. The Senate is considering its own bill.

An anti-illegal immigration

group led by former Republican gubernatorial candidate Don Goldwater is collecting signatures to get an initiative on the November 2008 ballot. It would revoke, on the first offense, licenses of businesses found hiring illegal workers.

Goldwater disputed claims that a labor shortage is blocking business growth. Businesses wouldn't have trouble finding American workers if they paid more, he said.

"We live in a free economy. Workers should be able to negotiate their price," said Goldwater, chairman of Legal Arizona Workers.

Brandt, the stucco business owner, said businesses need a reliable pool of workers to grow, which doesn't now exist because of the labor shortage.

"I don't truly think this is a wage issue. The other side tries to make it out that way," she said.