

TRAVEL BUSINESS ROUNDTABLE



June 4, 2003

The Honorable Donald Manzullo
Chairman
Committee on Small Business
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

On behalf of the Travel Business Roundtable (TBR), I would like to thank you for holding a hearing on the critical issue of the United States' policy on the issuance of business visas. TBR represents the broad diversity of the U.S. travel and tourism industry, with more than 80 member corporations and associations. Many of our member organizations represent or support small businesses that have been negatively affected by the slowdown in the processing of visas, particularly in the wake of September 11, 2001. Though TBR remains supportive of U.S. efforts to ensure that our borders are secure from those who wish to do us harm, it is imperative that this task be carried out in a manner that does not discourage legitimate visitors from coming to our country.

While your hearing will naturally focus on the plight of small businesses and the processing of business-related visas, it is worth noting that the types of policies that the State Department has undertaken in the past year-and-a-half have had broader effects on travel and tourism businesses of all sizes. Foreign tourists, businesspeople and workers are crucial to our industry's success – and in turn critical to our nation's economic health. Travel and tourism is America's third largest retail industry. It created \$98.8 billion in federal, state and local tax revenue in 2001, and despite declines in international visitorship in recent years (2001 international arrivals were down 12 percent from 2000, and estimates show a 7 percent decline in 2002 from 2001 levels), it has emerged as America's second largest service export, having generated a trade surplus for 14 consecutive years. TBR remains concerned that the State Department's recent determination that most visitors coming from the Middle East, Asia and Latin America will be subject to in-person interviews at U.S. embassies – implemented without additional staff or resources to ensure that the interviews and attendant visa processing procedures will be conducted in an expeditious manner – will discourage and possibly dissuade foreign tourists, businesspersons and much-needed seasonal industry workers from coming to the U.S. at a time that we need them most.

TBR has been working – and hopes to continue to work in a constructive manner – with Congress, the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security to ensure that the nation's security interests are balanced with the necessary assurances that legitimate visitors feel welcome to travel, conduct business and work in our country. We further support the provision of necessary funds to facilitate this process. Again, TBR thanks you for examining this issue in your Committee and for the opportunity to provide our input. Attached for your further information, please find a letter we sent to Secretary Powell regarding our concerns about visa processing delays.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jonathan M. Tisch".

Jonathan M. Tisch, Chairman

TRAVEL BUSINESS ROUNDTABLE



October 23, 2002

The Honorable Colin L. Powell
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Powell:

On behalf of the Travel Business Roundtable (TBR), a 75-member CEO-based organization that represents the broad diversity of the U.S. travel and tourism industry, I am writing to express our concern about a visa policy change currently under review within the State Department that could have a serious impact on the ability of international businesspersons and tourists to enter the United States.

It is our understanding that, starting November 1, the Department is planning to require all applicants for "J" and "F" visas to appear for in-person interviews with a U.S. consular officer. We further understand that in the coming months, this interview policy is to be expanded to all non-immigrant visa applicants at all U.S. consulates. If in fact you are planning on expanding this policy in such a manner, we are particularly concerned that if this proposal is implemented without substantial staff increases to consulates, it will result in severe backlogs that will hinder the travel of legitimate tourists and businesspersons to the U.S. If expansion to all non-immigrant visa applications is not your intent, we would greatly appreciate a clarification.

Please understand that TBR is extremely supportive of your Department's mission and the tireless efforts of the U.S. government as a whole to ensure that terrorists and other individuals who wish to do harm to the U.S. and its citizens are prevented from entering our borders. Indeed, for all of us, the security of our nation is the highest priority. However, it is our hope that the Department will implement this policy in a manner that will minimize disruption to the travel and tourism industry in part and the U.S. economy as a whole. In 2000, international visitors spent an estimated \$106.5 billion in the U.S., supporting more than 18 million jobs and \$92 billion in federal, state and local tax revenues. As President Bush and Office of Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge have stated, it is imperative that the U.S. seek solutions that will balance our security needs with our need to ensure that the flow of U.S. commerce continues.

With that in mind, TBR respectfully requests that you will consider ways of implementing this policy in a manner that will have minimal impact on our economy. Some suggestions for your consideration would be to phase in the interview requirement to allow time to increase consular staff, or to apply the interview requirement to a certain percentage of applicants, selected at random.

