

## Delta takes stand on Obama immigration plan



ASSOCIATED PRESS President Barack Obama speaks about immigration at Del Sol High School, in Las Vegas, Friday, Nov. 21, 2014. The president unveiled expansive executive actions on immigration Thursday night to spare nearly 5 million people in the U.S. illegally from deportation, setting off a fierce fight with Republicans over the limits of presidential powers.

Rare is the Atlanta corporation that wades in full press-release mode into one of the nation's more contentious political problems. But Delta Air Lines took the unusual step last week of praising President Obama's attempt to fix the nation's broken immigration system.

Fortune 500 stalwarts including Coca-Cola and Home Depot said Monday they support efforts to reform immigration policy, though none lauded Obama's executive order as did Delta. Business groups representing Georgia's farmers, manufacturers and technology professionals said the president didn't go far enough to fill gaps of low- and high-skilled workers. Other groups, such as the Metro Atlanta and Georgia chambers of commerce, wouldn't comment.

All of which made Delta's position more remarkable.

"Delta Air Lines applauds the steps announced this week to enact much-needed reforms to the nation's immigration system," Joanne Smith, the airlines' human resources chief, said in a statement last Friday. "The President's actions will provide economic development opportunities and enhance public safety by streamlining legal immigration while cracking down on illegal immigration at the border and focusing on deporting felons rather than families."

Delta declined further comment Monday, so it wasn't clear if the stance reflects some business objective or simply the views of the airline's leadership. CEO Richard Anderson has previously criticized Georgia's immigration laws.

Others, though, weighed in on the politically charged atmosphere surrounding immigration.

"There are many businesses that would applaud Obama's order, but just can't do it politically," said **Campbell Harvey**, a finance professor at Duke University. "Delta must have calculated that the risk is fairly small and the gain

fairly large. They've definitely taken a leadership position on a very important issue for the future of the U.S. economy."

Phil Kent, a member of the Georgia Immigration and Enforcement Review Board, said the airline plays politics at its own economic peril.

"Since Delta Air Lines chooses to take political sides when it comes to supporting President Obama's illegal immigrant executive order that waives certain laws he doesn't like, then perhaps the Georgia legislature should finally waive the far- too-generous fuel tax breaks it gives to Delta," he said.

Obama's order shields as many as 5 million immigrants from deportation, revamps law enforcement tactics and rejiggers the visa system. Work permits would be provided to undocumented immigrants with children who were born here or are legal permanent residents. The worker must have lived five years in the U.S., submit to background checks and pay taxes.

In Georgia, an estimated 116,000 immigrants without legal status were raising U.S.-born children in 2012, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

The changes are expected to boost undocumented workers' wages and tax payments and allow greater job movement while increasing U.S. productivity levels. Raul Hinojosa-Ojeda, a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, says 160,000 new jobs would be created and incomes would rise by \$6.8 billion.

The White House, though, estimates that the executive order would add little — less than 0.1 percent a year — to the nation's GDP. More significant legislative reforms to immigration would boost economic growth by \$41 billion annually.

"What (Obama) did may be of benefit, but it doesn't address our needs in agriculture," said Charles Hall, executive director of the Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association. "We need a fix to allow access to a dependable workforce and the ability to utilize a market-based visa program that would help growers get guest workers when we need them."

Hall said the current H-2A visa program, which allows employers to fill temporary agricultural jobs with foreign workers, fills less than 20 percent of farmers' labor needs. The president didn't tinker with H-2A visas.

Obama didn't boost the annual limit on H-1B visas, currently 65,000, for skilled techies, but his order allows college students and recent graduates in science, technology, engineering and math to stay longer upon graduation. Their timeline for a green card gets shortened too.

"We've got a skills gap in this country and, until it's addressed adequately, it's going to require us to rely on folks from outside the country with those skills," said Roy Bowen, president of the Georgia Association of Manufacturers.

Bowen and Hall, like most business groups, look to Congress to come up with a comprehensive immigration remedy. Coke and Home Depot, reached Monday, also espoused a legislative fix.

“Sound immigration policy makes good business sense and we broadly support immigration reform, but we haven’t endorsed any specific approach,” Home Depot spokesman Stephen Holmes said.