Law is chasing Mexican tourists, dollars away

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Arizona's reckless new immigration law is sabotaging a vital economic resource at a time of an enduring budget shortfalls.

Consider these numbers:

• $2.7 billion - the amount legal Mexican tourists/shoppers spent in Arizona from July 2007 through June 2008.

• 23,000-plus - the number of wage-and-salary jobs in Arizona directly attributable to those legal Mexican visitors.

• 17 percent - the decline in Mexican shoppers entering Arizona in the months after Senate Bill 1070 was signed in late April, compared with the same period in 2009.

Legal shoppers from Mexico are a growing source of revenue to Arizona.

According to research by the University of Arizona's Eller College of Management, the number of legal shoppers from Mexico traveling to Arizona by vehicle increased by 5 percent from 2001 to fiscal 2008. There was a 34 percent increase in those who arrived in Phoenix or Tucson by air.

These shoppers have choices. Las Vegas is actively courting them with attractive travel packages. New Mexico is working to increase commerce of all kinds with Mexico.

These are tough economic times, but travel to the United States from Mexico is down less than 7 percent across the southwestern border, according to the U.S. Customs and Border Protection. In Arizona, the decrease was far more dramatic.

This is not a coincidence.

Mexico issued a travel warning to its citizens days after Gov. Jan Brewer signed SB 1070.

Over-reaction? Maybe. But the negative perceptions of what that law does are not limited to south of the border. A survey by The Arizona Republic found that 73 percent of Latinos living in Arizona feel they are more likely to be discriminated against now than they were six months ago.

SB 1070 makes it more likely that middle-class Mexican families with visas and money to spend will skip Arizona.

If that becomes a habit, the state will lose a powerful source of income that benefits retail stores, restaurants, gas stations, hotels, airlines and entertainment venues.
This will not be offset by a resolution to the problem of illegal immigration. SB 1070 can't deliver that.

The solution to illegal border crossing can only come from Congress.

In order to be effective, the solution needs to include border security and an expanded guest-worker program, which has an efficient system to verify worker eligibility and tough, enforced sanctions for employers who hire the undocumented. It needs to provide a way for those currently living here illegally to come forward and earn legal status.

SB 1070 cannot do those things. It is so flawed a federal judge temporarily enjoined some of its key provisions in response to one of seven lawsuits filed to stop it.

It is so ill-conceived it makes Arizona's Latino residents feel targeted.

It is so reckless it chases away business in these tough economic times.