I was thrilled to hear this week’s announcement by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security that qualified Taiwan residents will soon be able to travel to the United States without a visa for business or pleasure and stay up to 90 days. Taiwan will join 36 nations on the U.S. Visa Waiver Program, which allows international travelers wanting to come to the United States to avoid the complicated and time-consuming process of applying for a U.S. visa, as well as paying high application fees.

Roget Hsu, secretary general of the Travel Agent Association of the Republic of China, Taiwan, predicted that being added to the visa waiver program will result in an “immediate travel surge” of Taiwan tourists to Hawai’i because of its tropical climate during the winter months. (Source: eTurboNews Global Travel Industry News)

It is difficult to say how large that surge will be, but after South Korea joined the visa waiver program in 2008, the number of visitors from that country has more than tripled to an expected 140,000 South Korean visitors to Hawai’i this year.

Adding Taiwan to the visa waiver program is the latest example of how long-standing barriers to international travel to the United States are starting to fall significantly. According to eTurboNews Global Travel Industry News:

• Currently, 88 percent of visa applicants are interviewed within three weeks after submitting an application.
• Visa-processing capacity has increased by 40 percent for Brazil and will increase by that amount in China by December 2012.
• A program to waive visa interviews and increase efficiency has been launched in 28 countries.
• Global Entry, a U.S. Customs and Border Protection program that allows expedited clearance for pre-approved, low-risk travelers upon arrival in the United States, has been expanded to nationals from South Korea, Mexico, Canada and the Netherlands. Through a limited pilot program, it also is being extended to citizens of the United Kingdom, Germany and Qatar.

All of these steps — and many more to come — will improve the total overseas visitor experience and increase the number of international travelers coming to the United States.

Not only does an increase in international tourism help America’s economy, the visa waiver program clearly demonstrates an important principle: If you eliminate or streamline the visa process, the number of visitors to the United States will increase and new job opportunities will be created!

A recent U.S. Travel Association study shows that for every 33 additional overseas visitors who come to the United States, one new job is created!

To put that into perspective, if the number of visitors from Taiwan to Hawai’i last year — 8,186 — doubles in 2013 because of the visa waiver program, their presence, activities and spending would create about 248 new jobs.

The jobs created may be in a hotel, a restaurant or tourist attraction frequented by visitors. Or the jobs might be in Longs Drugs, Safeway or any store in a shopping mall where visitor industry workers shop.

Revenue from a vast array of taxes, such as the General Excise Tax, the Transient Accommodations Tax (hotel tax), car rental taxes, alcoholic beverage and cigarette taxes, gasoline taxes and property taxes, is generated as visitors and visitor industry workers spend their money throughout our Islands. This revenue helps pay the salaries and retirement benefits of thousands of state and county employees, including those of the wonderful teachers who are educating our keiki in public schools.

Then, hana hou! That money “works again” as it is re-circulated several times throughout the community, repeating the process time after time and helping to create jobs each step of the way.

The Travel & Tourism industry generates jobs and economic activity across America. But because the visitor industry is the driving economic force in our special island state, it should be obvious that In Hawai’i, Tourism Is Everybody’s Business!