Survey tests impact of Homeland Security laws

By Frank Norton

With war in Iraq raging on and terrorism concerns lingering, a team of local researchers will try to gauge effects of stepped-up federal security measures on South Florida's business sectors.

With sponsorship from the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, researchers at Florida International University are this week distributing a survey to more than 6,000 local companies asking about the impacts of new homeland security laws. Results are tentatively due April 25, an extension of the original deadline of Friday.

"We are so dependent on trade and finance and the flow of people and capital through our region that this legislation is potentially huge for us," said David Wernick, project leader and research director at Florida International University’s College of Business.

Mr. Wernick said the USA Patriot Act, enacted shortly after the Sept. 11 attacks in order to curb money laundering and terrorist financing, is still being phased in and its effects must be studied in detail in order to gauge changes to the business climate.

Many South Florida international bankers have already said the act's exhaustive know-your-customer rules are time consuming, costly and potentially dangerous to foreign nationals.

Some think the new rules are driving international private banks to alternative offshore banking centers in Panama, the Bahamas and the Cayman Islands.

Mr. Wernick said the new survey, crafted after countless interviews with South Florida business owners and executives, is designed to identify and weigh additional security costs in banking and other key sectors including education, health care and international trade — all of which are subject to tighter homeland security laws.

Tourism and Real Estate sectors will factor into the study's results but are not part of the survey.

The roughly 30-page questionnaire was designed by Mr. Wernick and Dr. Laura Kozlowski, a professor of international business and management at the university.

It is divided by industry in order to expedite responses.

The joint mission will report its findings to Gov. Jeb Bush's office and key federal legislators in Washington by June, organizers said.

“We've heard many complaints from the business community about their confusion and frustration with increased security demands and how it affects their business that we felt we really had to do something," said Alice Ancona, a project manager with the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce. "This just gives us a way to get that information out to decision makers and let our businesses be heard."

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