South Florida hospitals are losing business, because patients from overseas face growing hassles to get visas to visit and receive treatment.

Seaports are losing shipments, because companies sending goods between Latin America and Europe are switching to ports abroad to avert cumbersome new U.S. paperwork and inspections.

Those are just two examples cited in a study released Friday by the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce on how new security measures since Sept. 11, 2001, are hurting South Florida's business.

The study found security measures too often are knee-jerk and not well thought out, lack sufficient funding to fulfill mandates and include little business input to make sure procedures are practical and cost-effective.

To redress the woes, it suggested government work more closely with business on security plans and also better weigh business costs in the long-term war on terror.

"In a word, federal authorities need to ensure that checkpoints don't become choke points," said the study by the chamber and Florida International University's College of Business Administration.

South Florida is especially hard hit by the new measures, because it depends on international transit of people and goods perhaps more than any other community in the United States.

Miami International Airport, for example, ranks tops nationally for international passengers switching planes between foreign countries and No. 1 for international cargo -- much of it flowers, fruits and vegetables shipped from Latin America to Europe and other parts of the world. Efficient clearance is vital to develop that business.

"The security challenges are perhaps the strongest challenges this community has ever seen," said trade attorney Lee Sandler, chairman of the chamber's global business center in presenting the report at a news conference.

Miami also is vying to become headquarters for the proposed 34-nation Free Trade Area of the Americas -- a designation that would bring the city new jobs, travelers and prestige, much as Brussels has gained as the base for the European Union.

Yet Miami's chances for the FTAA office are weakened when security measures are implemented in ways that make U.S. travel a hassle, warned Antonio J. Villamil, chairman of the governor's council of economic advisers and a chamber member.

"We want to make sure we can be a friendly base to put the secretariat," said Villamil, citing delays in U.S. visa approvals as helping bids from rival cities in Panama and Trinidad.
To help reach security goals in a more business-friendly manner, the study made 10 key proposals to be shared with Florida legislators, Gov. Jeb Bush, the White House and federal agencies, said the chamber's new president, Isilio Arriaga, former chief of Hollywood-based Hispanic Unity of Florida.

Top of the list: adding staff at U.S. consular offices overseas to hasten visa approvals now that more visits to the United States require face-to-face interviews for visas.

"We have to make sure that people who want to come here to do business can do it," said David Wernick, research director at FIU's Center for Excellence in Management, who led the 10-month study.

The report also recommended:

- Adding more inspectors and X-ray machines to speed cargo clearance at the Port of Miami and Port Everglades, now that cargo is more frequently inspected

- Delaying enforcement until June of sweeping new rules on food imports scheduled to take effect Dec. 12, so the government can finalize the regulations, train staff in new software and give companies more time to comply

- Revising requirements on banks under the U.S. Patriot Act that have prompted a loss of deposits and delayed closing of real-estate sales in Florida, among other complications.

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