

CA startup sees entrepreneur-ship as visa solution

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A drawing provided by Blueseed Co. shows their ferry docking next their cruise ship outside of San Francisco. California startup Blueseed Co. wants to dock a vessel off the coast to house foreign entrepreneurs who have dreams of creating the next Google but can't get visas to work in the United States. The ship aims to provide a remedy by giving foreign entrepreneurs a place to build their companies only a short boat ride from high tech's hub. (AP Photo/Blueseed Co.)

(AP) -- You've heard of tech companies starting in a Silicon Valley garage. What about on a ship?

That's the idea being floated by a California startup that wants to dock a vessel off the coast to house foreign entrepreneurs who have dreams of creating the next [Google](#) but can't get visas to work in the United States.

Sunnyvale-based Blueseed Co. says current immigration rules can sink promising ventures and torpedo innovation and job creation.

The ship aims to provide a remedy by giving foreign entrepreneurs a place to build their companies only a short boat ride from high tech's hub.

"A lot of people say, 'I'd like to go to Silicon Valley' but there is no way for them to do it," said Max Marty, Blueseed CEO and co-founder.

Marty, the son of Cuban immigrants, thought of the ship after listening to international classmates of his at the University of Miami business school lament about having to leave the U.S. after graduation.

Politicians have wrangled with the issue, but efforts to change the system have stalled.

Last July, President [Barack Obama](#) said during a Twitter town hall he wanted to make sure talented people who studied in the U.S. were able to stay to create jobs.

"We don't want to pay for training them here and then having them benefit other countries," Obama said.

A bill to address so-called brain-drain was reintroduced this year by Sens. Mark Udall, D-Colo., [John Kerry](#), D-Mass., and Richard Lugar, R-Ind. The Startup Visa Act would allow immigrant entrepreneurs and foreign graduates from U.S. universities to appeal for a two-year visa "on condition that they secure financing from a qualified U.S. investor and can demonstrate the ability to create American jobs."

But Blueseed founders don't expect any real reform from a bitterly divided Congress during an election year.

"Our solution is an entrepreneurial solution," said Dario Mutabdzija, Blueseed's president.

From cruise ships to [oil rigs](#) to military aircraft carriers, there are several examples of individuals living and working on ships. This one would accommodate about 1,000 people and be docked 12 miles southwest of San Francisco Bay, in international waters.

It would be registered in a country with a reputable legal system, maybe the Bahamas or the Marshall Islands, Marty said. Residents would be subject to the laws of that nation.

Residents would be ferried ashore with temporary business or tourist visas, which are easier to get, to meet with investors, collaborators, partners and others. Mutabdzija said the ability to have face-to-face meetings cannot be underestimated when trying to gain trust - and secure funds - from investors.

"Yes, we live in an interconnected age with Skype and other video conferencing. But if you want to grow a company, physical interactions are of paramount importance," Mutabdzija said. "We're a startup. We ran into this. Some people said if you're not within a 20 mile radius, we won't talk to you."

The proximity to high-tech's center, Silicon Valley, is also important.

"The talent, the money, the expertise and a cultural acceptance of risk. Elsewhere if it doesn't work out, you're a black sheep and the funds dry up," Mutabdzija said.

The ship would be a remodeled cruise ship or barge that Blueseed leases or owns. It would have all the high-tech amenities expected of a startup incubator and the look of employee-friendly Internet giants Facebook and Google, famous for their modern campuses complete with gourmet cafeterias, exercise facilities and an environmentally-sustainable design.

A live-work space would cost about \$1,200 a month.

Logistical support, including food and other supplies, would come from local businesses along the coast, helping the economies of Half Moon Bay and San Francisco, though it hasn't been determined exactly which port Blueseed would use.

A helicopter also would be available for emergencies.

Critics deride the ship as a publicity stunt, and say investors would be better served contributing to ventures that help Americans create businesses.

"I would say the whole thing is a perfect metaphor for how in corporate America the practice to grow talent and incubate business locally is drifting away - quite literally," said Bob Dane, of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which advocates for limited immigration.

But supporters of foreign entrepreneurship say immigrants are responsible for some of the most successful businesses in the world and if the U.S. doesn't try to attract them, others will.

"The ship may sound like a crazy idea but it illustrates how seriously flawed the immigration system here is," said John Feinblatt, who runs Partnership for a New American Economy, which advocates for immigration reform.

The organization published a report in June that said 40 percent of Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or their children.

Feinblatt said countries including Chile, Singapore and the United Kingdom have programs to attract immigrant entrepreneurs.

"While the U.S. is driving people away, other countries are welcoming them with open arms," he said. "If you miss out on them, you miss their talent, their ideas and ultimately the jobs that they create and the taxes that they pay."

Christopher S. Bentley, a spokesman with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, said the agency has not seen the proposal and it's premature to comment.

Maritime experts say such an idea is feasible, but very costly.

"A good single point mooring costs in the millions of dollars but it could restrain a ship-shape vessel in quite severe storms and in deep water," said Bil Stewart, CEO of Houston-based Stewart Technology Associates, an engineering consultancy specializing in offshore and marine structures.

"But it would be prudent if the vessel had its own propulsion if you had a Pacific hurricane come along," Stewart added.

Blueseed's idea has started gaining steam.

[Silicon Valley](#) investor Peter Thiel, a founder of PayPal, announced he would lead Blueseed's financing search. Thiel has been a big supporter of "seasteads" - self-ruling cities on the ocean - and both Marty and Mutabdzija worked at the Seasteading Institute.

Blueseed wants to raise \$10 million to \$30 million over the next year and a half. The goal would be to launch in late 2013.

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