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# Give small businesses our tariff money back | GUEST COMMENTARY



Containers are stacked at the Port of Long Beach Friday, Feb. 20, 2026, in Long Beach, Calif. (AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes)



By **SERENA SATO**

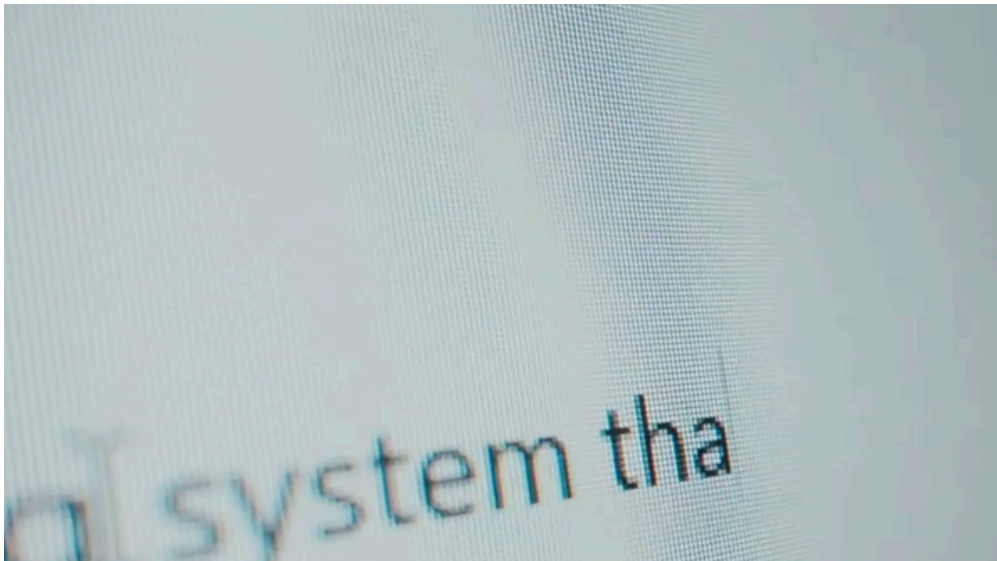
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Tariffs have dominated the headlines for months, but for small businesses like ours in Carroll County, tariffs have dominated our bottom line. They show up as large bills that we are forced to pay immediately when our products arrive in the United States.

Over the past year, those bills have been staggering.

Our nonprofit organization, SERRV International, imports handmade, fair trade products from more than 20 countries. These are baskets, textiles, ceramics and other handcrafted items made by artisans who depend on fair trade partnerships for their livelihoods.

Last year, tariffs cost our small business \$204,098.28. So far in 2026, we have already paid another \$17,033.89.



That is nearly \$222,000 taken directly out of a small business, money that should have been used to grow our organization, support artisans with more purchases and create jobs here in Maryland.

Instead, it went to the federal government.

When tariffs hit, businesses like ours must pay them immediately when goods enter the country. That happens long before we know whether those products will sell or whether we will ever recover the cost. For small businesses without massive cash reserves, that creates enormous financial pressure.

The impact in 2025 was immediate. We had to reduce purchases because the tariffs made importing goods significantly more expensive. That meant buying fewer products from the artisans we partner with around the world.

Those tariffs also affected decisions here at home. We left open positions unfilled that we otherwise would have hired for. Instead of investing in people and growth, those funds were diverted to tariff payments.

And because our costs increased so dramatically, we had little choice but to raise prices. No small business owner wants to do that, especially when customers are already dealing with higher costs in nearly every part of their lives.

The result was predictable: higher prices and fewer staff contributed to a decline in sales.

That is why the Supreme Court's recent decision overturning the use of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act to impose tariffs brought an immediate sense of relief. It confirmed what many small businesses had felt all along, that the government overstepped in imposing these tariffs.

Yet before the ink was even dry on the court's decision, the president announced plans for new tariffs of 10-15%. For businesses like ours, the reaction brought immediate frustration.

Tariffs are often described as a way to pressure foreign governments. But in reality, the people who pay them are American businesses and consumers.

For our organization, that meant almost \$220,000 in tariff payments, money that could have supported local hiring, growth and our mission of partnering with artisans around the world.

Some people may think the recent ruling by the United States Court of International Trade stating that every business that paid tariffs should be refunded would ease our worry. But it only adds to it. What if the government appeals? Or delays liquidations? It could be years before we see the money we already paid — money the federal government has no right to. Money that belongs to the small businesses that were forced to pay it.

Congress should step in and ensure that new tariffs are blocked and small businesses are quickly refunded the tariffs we were already forced to pay under a policy the courts have now rejected.

Small businesses should not be treated like a piggy bank for government trade experiments.

We took the hit. We paid the bill. And now that the courts have ruled, it's only fair that the government returns money that was never theirs to keep.

*Serena Sato is the CEO and president of SERRV International, a fair-trade nonprofit organization founded in New Windsor in 1949. It empowers small-scale global artisans and farmers through long-term trading partnerships.*

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