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Businesses feel labor crunch

Visa issues, housing costs affect local employment market



The Steamboat Smokehouse restaurant, shown here along Lincoln Avenue on Thursday afternoon, is one of many businesses in Steamboat Springs searching for additional employees. [Enlarge photo](#) — Photo by [Brian Ray](#)

By [Blythe Terrell](#)

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Steamboat Springs — In the job merry-go-round that is Steamboat Springs, employers sometimes have a tough time finding and hanging on to qualified workers. The labor market is tight, some say, which partly accounts for the “help wanted” signs plastered around town.

Steamboat Smokehouse Restaurant on Lincoln Avenue always is looking for people, owner Fritz Aurin said.

“We have been shorthanded most of the season,” he said. “We have been lucky that a lot of good people have just come in at the right time.”

Aurin has run the restaurant for 17 years. He said it gets more difficult to find workers each year. It’s also tough to go outside Steamboat to recruit, Aurin said, because employees then have to find housing.

New hires often join up with employees who are looking for roommates, he said. Aurin has even put employees up in his own home.

“It seems like they always find something, but the economic pressures on the rent payments are just huge,” he said.

Employees who came from out of the country on work visas saved Smokehouse this ski season, Aurin said. Many of his workers have three-month J-1 visas.

Visa challenges

Sandy Evans Hall, executive vice president of the Steamboat Springs Chamber Resort Association, said visa issues are creating labor shortages toward the end of the ski season. She said businesses in the tourism industry typically rely on two types of foreign workers: those who have three-month J-1 visas and those who have six-month H-2B seasonal visas.

The government caps the amount of H-2B visas at 66,000 nationally each fiscal year, which Evans Hall said left some local seasonal businesses in the lurch. The government previously had allowed workers who previously worked here on H-2B visas to return for an additional two years without counting them toward that 66,000 cap, Evans Hall said, but that arrangement expired.

That meant employers relied more on J-1 workers, she said.

Employees with J-1 visas typically “can’t start until a little bit later in December, which is usually not a huge issue,” she said. “But the other side of it is they have to leave the first of March, which is a huge issue.”

Evans Hall said she did hear about a labor crunch.

“It felt like we were a lot shorter on staff, and I think everyone I talked to (said) it was because of the J-1 visa workers,” she said. “That’s what caught us in a bind this year: We had a huge part of our work force that had to leave early.”

Steamboat Ski & Resort Corp. saw a few employment dips but was not consistently short on workers, spokeswoman Heidi Thomsen said. A couple of weeks ago, office workers had to help out on the mountain, she said. But Thomsen said that was mostly because the day was particularly crowded — not because Ski Corp. was short-staffed.

“That’s not out of the ordinary,” Thomsen said. “That’s something we do at peak times, typically around the Christmas holiday.”

Evans Hall said the chamber tried to pitch in and boost morale in the tourism industry a couple of weeks ago. Staff members baked more than 500 cookies and carted them around town to workers on the mountain and in businesses.

“It was the end of the season here, we wanted them to be friendly, and it’s hard to do that when you’re understaffed and overworked,” she said. “We wanted to show appreciation to some of the workers.”

Seasonal transition

Ski season is entering its last week, and other businesses are starting to look for spring and summer workers, Duckels Construction owner Fred Duckels said.

He said his company has about 40 workers now and typically has at least double that in summer.

Duckels has just started looking for his summer staff.

“We’re always shorthanded,” he said. “We have to work with the competent people we have. You could do a lot more work, but you can’t find the people. As soon as you try to get marginal people and do more work, that’s a recipe for losing money.”

He said they have to sort through a lot of applications to find people who fit. Duckels said he prefers people who live in Steamboat because his company has had little luck with those who don’t. The housing issue crops up again with out-of-towners, Duckels said.

“I’m sure that’s a problem,” he said. “That’s why it’s difficult for people to come in from outside. If they don’t have a place to live and everything, it’s hard to get started.”

Connell Resources almost is set on staff for the summer, senior estimator Trace Musgrave said. The construction company has three spots to fill, which he said Connell hopes to have covered by the time the season gets going the first of May.

But those employees don’t necessarily live in town.

“At least 50 percent of the people we employ here live in either Hayden or Craig,” said Musgrave, a Hayden resident who serves on the community’s Town Board.