



Vail Daily

Foreign workers may be scarce in Vail Valley

Work visas have run out, businesses say

Tuesday, August 5, 2008

Matt Terrell
Vail, CO Colorado

EAGLE COUNTY, Colorado — Thanks, Congress.

Gary Gilman, owner of SteamMaster Cleaning and Restoration in Minturn, has echoed those words for the last three years, as Congress has failed to enact legislation that would make it easier for businesses to hire foreign workers for seasonal jobs.

Only 66,000 people per year are allowed in on what's called an "H2B" visa. Since the visas are for seasonal work, the government has two application periods per year. During the most recent period, the limit was hit last week.

Gilman thought he'd beaten the deadline, but was told this week his application hit the local U.S. Department of Labor office the same day the visa limit was reached.

"There's a high likelihood our packet's coming back unprocessed," Gilman said. "If they cash our (application) check, then we'll be good."

So Gilman is looking to get through the coming winter the way he's worked through the past two — by hiring foreign workers on student visas.

"There's more turnover, more training, but we'll have to do it," he said.

The answer isn't so simple for local transit agencies.

This year, Congress let expire a part of the immigration laws that allowed workers who had been with the same employer in previous seasons to come to this country to work without counting against the national cap.

Congress failed to renew that part of the law this year. When the visa cap was hit last week, Vail had its recruiter in Australia, rounding up the roughly 35 winter-season bus drivers it needs.

"It's not just a numbers problem, it's a human problem," Vail Human Resources Department Director John Power said. "We have people who left things here, left cars here, and can't even come get them unless they come back as tourists."

Vail, Eagle County and communities including Jackson, Wyo., are part of partnership that brought Australian drivers to this country. The partners in Colorado are aggravated, especially since the Wyoming Department of Labor processed Jackson's applications and forwarded them to the feds a couple of weeks before Colorado officials did the same for Vail and other communities. Jackson got its drivers.

Power's now scrambling to keep winter bus service on a schedule that's at least close to the usual 10-minute intervals.

"We're going to do whatever we have to do to get that done," he said.

Ideas for filling those driver jobs include harder recruiting on the Front Range, searching in American territories including Puerto Rico for drivers, and, just maybe, putting some other Vail employees to work driving buses.

The valley's biggest winter employer has been hit, too.

Vail Resorts refused to disclose how many seasonal-visa workers it usually hires, instead e-mailing a statement that read:

"We're disappointed that many of these talented employees won't be able to join the Vail Resorts family this year. We will continue to work diligently to resolve this situation and bring them back next season. However, in anticipation of this potential outcome, we launched a very aggressive company-wide recruiting campaign beginning last spring with the addition of a director of recruiting, a state-of-the-art recruiting system and a whole range of recruiting tools. We have 15,000 employees across our entire company and we are confident that we will be staffed to deliver the exceptional experience this winter that our guests have come to expect."

In another e-mail, spokeswoman Kelly Ladyga said the company will employ some foreign workers for the coming ski season.

Those workers, presumably, will be hired under some of the same visas Gilman uses at SteamMaster. But early return dates for those students last ski season put a number of the resort company's managers to work in on-mountain jobs for the last few weeks of last ski season.

While Gilman said his company will get by, he said Congress needs to solve the problem.

"How long is the government going to be paralyzed on this?" Gilman said. "You know, 30,000 visas doesn't even last a week."

Business Editor Scott N. Miller can be reached at 748-2930, or smiller@vaildaily.com.