

Pelican Bay looks to help workers with housing

By JENNA BUZZACCO

Sunday, October 14, 2007

It happens every year.

As the streets of Pelican Bay become more congested, seasonal employees silently take their positions manning the community's trams, restaurants and beaches.

It's those seasonal employees who fly in for a six-month stint at Pelican Bay that the foundation is hoping to help by looking into purchasing work-force housing, said Pelican Bay Foundation President Jim Hoppenstead.

The foundation has not purchased property, but Hoppenstead said the idea has been floating around several years. And as the number of apartment complexes in Southwest Florida shrinks, Hoppenstead said it's becoming difficult to find the number of apartments needed to accommodate employees.

The community has about 140 annual employees, but as season creeps closer it adds 120 seasonal employees to work at the beach facilities. Many of those employees, Hoppenstead said, are foreign workers in town on an H2B visa "" a type of visa that allows foreign workers to come to the United States for a nonagricultural job on a seasonal basis.

"It's difficult for our to staff to find rentals of their own," he said.

So instead of asking seasonal employees to track down their own housing, the foundation rents out housing for their employees. Hoppenstead said the foundation looks for three-bedroom, two-bathroom apartments. That way, he said, up to six people can stay in a single apartment.

This year foreign workers will occupy at least 10 apartments in Bonita Springs, Hoppenstead said.

The community also runs 15-passenger vans to shuttle workers to and from work each day. Hoppenstead said the community is beginning a push to find housing closer to Pelican Bay.

"For the past four years we've been looking at owning housing," he said. "We've looked at several different models."

Those models include looking at buying an apartment building, motels and even condominiums.

But each model poses its own set of problems.

"What we really need is housing for just six months," he said.

While there's a myriad of condominiums on the market, Hoppenstead said going that route poses the most problems.

"We've looked at condo opportunities, but there's difficulties with condos," he said. "Most of the associations restrict the use to single families that are related."

Rarely do families come to work at Pelican Bay on the H2B visa, Hoppenstead said.

And while employees spend the majority of their time working at Pelican Bay, the foundation's charter does not allow employees to live in the community. According to Hoppenstead, members of the Pelican Bay Foundation, the nonprofit organization governing the community, can not also be employed by the foundation.

All Pelican Bay residents must be members of the Pelican Bay Foundation.

Hoppenstead said he isn't concerned about housing this year, but the foundation plans to make a push to purchase housing in the coming years.

"We've got apartments for this season. For this year that's enough," he said. "But we're becoming concerned as more and more apartment complexes convert."

© 2007 Naples Daily News and NDN Productions. Published in Naples, Florida, USA by the E.W. Scripps Co.