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Employers await outcome of today's visa hearing

Many doubt this season will be spared worker shortages

BY MARY LANCASTER INDEPENDENT WRITER

Restaurant customers may have to wait longer than usual to be served their meals this summer. Clients may not secure their favorite hairdressing appointment. Housekeepers at hotels and inns may have to work a longer day to ensure linens are changed and rooms are cleaned.

Along with peers on Martha's Vineyard and the Cape, though Nantucket business owners do not plan to shutter their shops this summer, they are concerned that a shortage of seasonal workers will hurt their ability to offer high quality service as well as their bottom line.

Today at 2 p.m. a hearing on the H- 2B visa program will be held by the House Immigration Subcommittee in Washington, D.C. to address the Save Our Small Business bill that seeks to reinstate the returning worker exemption to the H- 2B visa cap. The exemption expired last fall. The cap limit of 66,000 was reached on January 2 of this year, sooner than last year's limit was reached and before Cape and Islands employers were officially allowed to submit worker requests.

Even if the hearing provides a settlement of continuing discord about immigration legislation and how to allow needed workers into the country without risk of illegality or an alleged threat to jobs for Americans, business owners fear it will be too late to help them this summer. Hundreds of foreign workers have filled gaps for years for Nantucket employers because the visas allow them to come in April and stay until December.

College and high school students cannot meet this resort schedule because of school closing and opening dates, and many of the visa workers are welltrained after returning year upon year to the same jobs. While Tresses and the Day Spa owner Theresa Davis is not attending today's hearing, she anxiously awaits news of its outcome. Davis has sent letters to Governor Patrick, all state congressmen and senators and supplied other island business owners with a letter format so they, too, could petition for passage of the exemption. Davis is particularly frustrated over the politics hampering small business owners and has made it clear in her letter how a lack of seasonal employees will have a trickle-down effect on her business and those of others.

"My biggest frustration is with our elected officials and that they even let this thing expire last September," said Davis. "It just seems like during an election year nobody is willing to stand up and be accounted for because they don't want to look like they are giving away American jobs. We had no visas in 2004, which was an election year."

In her letter, Davis cites a likely cut in her salon's hours that will affect desired client services and visitor's decisions to return to the island as part of her concerns over short staffing. She also states that she will not advertise as often and that will affect local publications and TV as well as photographers and others; that she will trim purchases for her business, and not be able to afford to hire American workers who can fill positions for which visa workers do not qualify. She also states that this may mean she is unable to employ core staff during the winter because overall profits will be reduced.

"It feels like we're being used as pawns in the political game and that our lives and the lives of the people who work for us don't really matter," said Davis.

Nantucket Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Tracy Bakalar is not attending the hearing, either, explaining that only two members of the public will be allowed to speak in favor of the overall H-2B visa program. One will be a business person from Michigan and the other will be William Zammer who owns restaurants on the Cape.

"There is always hope, but it's late for this to have any effect on this season," said Bakalar. "It doesn't sound like this will be the answer to our problem."