

TOM WALSH

Businesses count on immigrants

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So what if a couple hundred Jamaicans are denied temporary visas to work summers at the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island?

So what if the owners of the Grand Hotel and other seasonal businesses have to work harder at recruiting in the off-season?

Shouldn't they be hiring unemployed Americans? Or college students on summer break?

R. Dan Musser III, president of the 121-year-old Grand Hotel, has heard these questions hundreds of times, but if he's tired of answering them, he doesn't let on. The future of his family business, plus thousands of others across the United States, depends on the availability of seasonal labor.

That means Musser will join hundreds of landscapers, hoteliers, shrimpers and ski-resort operators today in Washington, D.C., to lobby legislators to renew the Save Our Small and Seasonal Businesses Act. The act, which expired last year, exempted returning workers from a national cap of 66,000 H2B visas for seasonal workers. Supporters hope to persuade Congress to revive it before adjourning this month.

"We don't think immigration will be at the top of the priority list for a new administration," Musser told me Monday, "so we're trying to get some action now."

Musser has tallied the costs and headaches of having to operate the Grand Hotel this year without the usual complement of returning workers. In past years, the total staff of about 600 included 250 Americans and 350 H2B workers, mostly longtime employees from Jamaica who returned annually.

This year, Musser said, the Grand Hotel has hired 54 more workers than in 2007, at a cost of \$340,000, including workers compensation insurance, wages, taxes and housing.

Despite extra staff, however, the hotel opened in May -- and will operate this month and in October -- with fewer workers than last year. That's because it had to hire more college students, both Americans and foreign students on J1 visas, who typically are available for work starting in late May and must return to school at the end of August. The hotel is open May 2-Oct. 26.

Early staff departures, Musser said, mean the hotel's off-site Woods restaurant will close Sept. 21, three weeks earlier than usual. Its Jockey Club restaurant beside the golf course stopped serving

dinner Sept. 7; it remains open for lunch. Cost of the curtailed restaurant hours: \$60,000 in lost revenue.

Recruiting costs were 125% higher than last year, as Musser, his head chef and other managers traveled the country to find workers.

Another cost, as yet unquantified because the impact could be long-lasting: Complaints have risen about waits to check in and to get service in the dining room.

Musser's issues at the Grand Hotel won't be resolved by hiring jobless Americans -- most want year-round work -- or students.

His longtime Jamaican workers aren't terrorists. They're not illegals, either; they go home every winter. And they know the work and the Grand Hotel's standards.

The "so what" in this story is that the viability of the iconic Grand Hotel and lots of other seasonal businesses depends on the availability of reliable seasonal workers. Is that so hard for Congress to grasp?

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