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Editorial

Ease limits on visas for guest workers

Restriction on temporary work permits hurts Michigan resorts

One of the many things that changed after Sept. 11 was the way America views its guest workers. Prior to the attacks, oversight on the H2B visa program for guest workers from other countries was relaxed. Now, it has been tightened so much that it is hurting the tourism and resort industries.

Among the destinations suffering from the reaction is Mackinac Island.

Before the terrorist attacks, the Immigration and Naturalization Service was to cap the number of permits issued at 66,000, but in reality upwards of 80,000 were receiving permits annually.

Today the 66,000 cap on nonfarm temporary workers is strictly enforced -- a bit too strictly. Prior to 2007, there had been an exemption for returning workers. But the Congressional Hispanic Caucus buried the "returning worker" exemption in 2007 by saddling it to a failed bill on comprehensive immigration reform. This means that the seasonal worker who's been coming from Jamaica to work summers in Mackinac Island during the six-month season and go back home is now shut out unless he or she is willing to spend three solid years in the United States without returning home.

That doesn't make sense. Grand Hotel President Dan Musser went to Washington this week to tell Congress that, and hopefully lawmakers will restore common sense to a program that had worked to discourage illegal immigration.

The Hispanic Caucus' insistence on linking the returning worker exemption with comprehensive immigration reform does more to punish guest workers and businesses than to promote reforms. The guest workers don't want to remain in America permanently. Few of the Jamaicans who have been coming to the Grand Hotel for decades have applied for green cards.

Opponents of the guest-worker program have questioned the wisdom of bringing in foreign help at a time when states like Michigan face nearly double-digit unemployment. But Musser says Americans have not filled the void left by the dearth of returning workers. "We would gladly hire American workers," Musser says, "and we've tried -- through advertisements, job fairs, college recruiting. It hasn't worked."

Congress should reinstitute the returning worker exemption and allow employers to get the seasonal workers they need, when they are needed.