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Concerns raised over lack of workers

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Branson's new downtown development will create more than 1,700 jobs, but some business owners say they can't keep the employees they have.

"Everyone knows it's a problem," said Bethany Thomas, Branson/Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce vice president of membership and funding.

"It's not just a Branson problem either," added Larry Schmit, of The Track. "It's a regional problem and if we don't start doing something now, Springfield will."

The chamber is currently looking for ways to attract more workers to the area. Stephen Marshall, of Chateau of the Lake, said he's having problems keeping them.

"There are some sections that we have to leave closed sometimes because we don't have enough servers to work in them," Marshall said. "It's a heck of a way to try and run a business. The same way that we advertise for tourists to come here, we need to advertise for workers to come here. No matter how many tourists we get here, it won't do any good if we don't have workers."

Chamber board member Doug Gerard, of Country Mart, said he feared that if the problem was not remedied, it could be detrimental to Branson's future.

"Bad service could turn tourists off and keep them from coming back," he said.

An option to entice people to work in Branson is to provide transportation.

"We're losing a lot of workers from Springfield and from Harrison, Ark., because gas prices are so high," Gerard said.

The board is also looking at hiring college students for the summer and providing them lodging.

"Disney has been doing this for years," said Brad Thomas, of Silver Dollar City.

"If we could offer these students a job and make it so they could get some kind of college credit while they're here, as well, that would be a win-win situation for everyone."

Chamber President and CEO Ross Summers said the students could live in some of the hotels in the area.

“There are plenty of businesses that have rooms available,” Summers said.

Another group of potential workers are retirees.

“When people come here to retire, they don’t want to sit around and be bored,” Thomas said. “A lot of them would probably be interested in working some.”

“They are definitely some of the most reliable workers,” Marshall added.

The chamber will either form a committee or assign a staff member to research solutions further, Summers said.

“We probably won’t be able to find a solution for 2006, but maybe 2007,” Marshall said. “So this summer will be survival of the fittest.”