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## Loss of temporary workers a concern locally

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Tourism officials and local business owners are concerned about the effect the loss of temporary workers may have on the Branson area.

Senate Bill 1639 (called the Immigration Reform Bill) failed to find approval in the U.S. Senate last week. The bill also included the measure allowing for foreign workers to work temporarily in the United States.

Branson/Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Ross Summers described the temporary workers as an important part of the Branson tourism industry.

"We probably have about 100-200 visitor workers in the area right now," Summers said. "Those workers are necessary to fill the gaps in our workforce that would normally go unfilled."

Visitor workers find employment in the United States through H2B visas, which allows foreign nationals to enter into the country and engage in nonagricultural, seasonal, intermittent or one-time occurrence employment. H2B visa workers are commonly used in communities that are dependent upon seasonal tourists. The businesses that most frequently utilize these workers are service position jobs such as in restaurants and lodging.

Stephen Marshall, general manager of Chateau on the Lake, said his hotel employs 35 such workers.

"We're going to have to get creative," Marshall said about the loss of the foreign workers. "We would like to hire local people for these jobs, but these jobs aren't the kind people want to do, so they don't apply for them."

Summers said there might still be some hope for the H2B program.

"I got a chance to talk with (U.S. Rep. Roy Blunt) and he said that he and (U.S. Senator Kit Bond) will be working on some legislation that will deal exclusively with the H2B visas and getting that program extended," Summers said.

"Until they can find a better solution, I would like to see them extended another year like they have the last three," Marshall said of the H2B visa program. "But right now it's the only solution we have."