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## Politicians harm tourism

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Raleigh

North Carolina's tourism industry, like many other states around the country, mushrooms during the summer season. Between April and the end of October, tourists flock to our beaches, mountains, and all places in between, staying at one of our 1,669 lodging entities and dining at one of our 14,477 restaurants, which creates a significantly larger need for employees than during the rest of the year.

N.C. tourism businesses work extremely hard to recruit local people to fill these jobs, but there just are not enough available and willing to work the short season or drive long distances for the work available. In the past, students filled many of the jobs, but through the years more and more students opt to take internships and travel instead of taking temporary summer employment.

To help bridge the gap, years ago the U.S. Congress developed the H2B visa program to allow short-term, non-agriculture workers from foreign countries to fill temporary seasonal jobs after a business demonstrates it has made every effort to hire residents living legally in America. Historically, only 66,000 of these guest workers are allowed to enter our country each year. Three years ago, when increased labor demands could not be filled by local workers, Congress approved a measure artificially raising that cap by not counting the international workers who return year after year. Congress must re-approve this returning worker provision by Oct. 1 each year in order to allow time for the long processing of the required paperwork in order for guest workers to arrive by the beginning of the summer tourism season.

Guest workers must be screened and approved before being approved for visas. They cannot have a criminal record or have ever been caught in the United States illegally; they cannot work for anyone other than the sponsor company, which allows for tracking of the individual; and the applying company has to advertise extensively for American workers and prove they are not available. At the end of the season, these workers must return to their home country.

Key to the certification process to obtain legal workers is the requirement to prove that no qualified American citizen wants the work. Classified ads, detailing job requirements and specifications, are placed in at least the largest newspaper in a metropolitan area, and employers attend job expos and career fairs and use other methods to recruit local workers. Companies are required to screen respondents, hire them or provide valid reasons they did not qualify.

Unfortunately, Congress adjourned for the holiday break without passing the returning worker provision, making it doubtful that any seasonal guest workers will arrive in time to help our upcoming summer season. Without guest workers, many tourism businesses will have to cut hours of operation, the services they provide and potentially the number of hotel rooms that they can rent as they will not have the staff to properly serve summer tourists.

This will jeopardize those businesses' ability to serve guests, and generate tourism sales and tax revenue upon which our state depends. Additionally, cuts in hours and services will place in jeopardy local workers' jobs and their ability to take personal time off during the peak of the summer season.



While legislation that would provide the necessary relief for the H2B program has widespread bipartisan support, a small number of members of Congress had Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., block this bill because they want their own unrelated legislation passed. This political gamesmanship could cost us and many other states a lot of lost business and tax revenue.

Upon their return to Washington, we urge our members of Congress to do what is right to help North Carolina's hospitality and tourism industry and not let that small group of politicians harm our state's and nation's tourism economy.

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