



Visa cap hurts locally

Eateries, hotels rely on foreign workers



Kevin A. Nakkarawoot and Byron Krueawong, both from Thailand, are working at the Lobster Cove Restaurant in York Beach.

By **Rob Levey**

yorkweekly@seacoastonline.com

May 14, 2008

YORK — While the nation's lawmakers continue to debate immigration laws, local businesses may find themselves short-staffed this summer.

According to Cathy Goodwin, president and CEO of the Greater York Region Chamber of Commerce, a cap on the country's H-2B visa program, which provides temporary employment opportunities to 66,000 unskilled foreign workers each year, was met Jan. 3.

"This has been a concern for a number of years," Goodwin said.

"Many permits are given out in October to ski resorts and other winter businesses," she said. "Here in York, we're at the end of the line for getting the visas. It is impacting our ability to hire foreign workers."

For Kathryn Weare, owner of The Cliff House Resort & Spa, the H-2B visa issue has had a tremendous impact on her business.

While in past years she has been able to hire upward of 45 foreign workers, she has only been able to hire 20 this year.

"We're opening rooms later, closing rooms earlier, and changing the way we operate to deal with having a lack of workers," Weare said. "I resent the fact that we're making it very difficult for foreign workers to return. They are legal workers who have lived here, paid taxes here, and we should be welcoming them back."

For David Gould, owner of Saxony Imports, foreign workers have become an integral part of his business.

"If I couldn't get (foreign workers), that would be a big problem for me," Gould said. "They are outstanding workers and great kids, too."

Betty Weaver, owner of The Lobster Barn, said she also has noted the changes this season.

"I get Russians every year, but the Jamaicans are having a hard time coming back," she said. "This year, business who use them might not be able to get them back and that presents some serious problems."

Steve Lyons, director of marketing for the state Office of Tourism, admits the visa issue could negatively affect tourism in Maine.

"We're concerned because we want people who visit Maine to have a good experience and that might be more difficult with smaller staffs," Lyons conceded.

According to Lyons, the stakes are high, as more than 40 million people visit Maine each year, while one-third of the state's tax revenue is attributed to tourism.

Getting workers to Maine is not the only problem.

Dave Peck, co-owner of Lobster Cove and The Goldenrod, employs between six and 12 seasonal workers every year.

He's managed to bring workers over, but said the cost of living in York is a cause for concern.

"I can get them here, but the problem is getting them affordable housing," Peck said. "If you can get past that, you're OK."

Local business owners say they cannot simply turn to an available domestic work force for the kinds of service jobs filled by foreign workers.

"Maine is the oldest, graying state, and we're not attracting people for these jobs," Weare said. I started hiring foreign workers seven to 10 years ago when we stopped being able to get local workers. ... We provide lodging, front their airfare — obviously, if we could find local workers, I'd be delighted."