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Foreign Student Summer Workers Weigh Weak Dollar

By Lauren Suit



WILDWOOD — The beach and the boardwalk here don't only draw tourists, the summer season has also appealed to hundreds of international students traveling abroad.

But as the dollar weakens, the lure to the states isn't as strong.

"I had a great time," said Brian Nooney, of Ireland, who spent four months in this county on the Bunac work and travel program two years ago. "But it doesn't make much sense for me to travel to the states to work anymore. For what it costs to go into the program and then live, I'd probably end up just breaking even or coming home at a loss."

Lina Zubiata, of Lithuania, who worked in Wildwood the summer of 2007 and 2006, told the Herald that she thought about returning stateside, but only for vacation.

"It wouldn't benefit my bank account to work," she said.

Instead she opted to work and study at an international college in Germany and estimates that she will go home to Lithuania with more money than working in the United States would have brought in.

That sentiment seems to be echoed in the United Kingdom, Poland, Czech Republic, as local businesses reported a substantial drop of workers from those countries.

However staffing problems aren't plaguing Morey's Piers, according to Denise Beckson, director of operations and human resources. Beckson said out of the 1,500 employees, 700 to 800 students are typically hired on seasonal J-1 visas. This year they kept to the norm and hired 800 international students this season.

"The motivation from certain countries has changed," she said. "In addition to the dollar being weak, more and more countries are being added to the European Union. So you can go to work for another country in the union without having to pay our visa fees, plus you'll be earning euros."

Beckson said that Morey's Piers looked into new markets such as Egypt, Jordan, Malaysia, and China to fill the seasonal staff positions.

"This was the first year we held a job fair in the Middle East," she said. "And we just held online interviews with students in China."

In future years, the company may also reach out to India.

Currently students from Thailand are working here now, she said. The Thai students will leave on Memorial Day and the students from Singapore will have just arrived.

Beckson said she believes the company is doing a good job of remaining competitive despite the economic situation.

"We are looking three to four years out in advance," she said of the seasonal international staff. "And it helps to have a good international reputation and ours is very good. Word of mouth is great advertising for us overseas."

Beckson said that because the company employs workers on a J-1 visa, a temporary work exchange visa for international students attending universities, they didn't encounter many staffing roadblocks.

However, many businesses that relied on a H-2B visa fell prey to the recent change in legislation.

Beckson said the company had normally petitioned to hire 30 to 40 workers on the H-2B visa in past years. Those workers could stay in the country for six months and were attractive candidates for employers because they could be trained for more intensive positions. Competition for the visa is slim, only 66,000 are issued for the country and that number is split during the winter and summer seasons.

Until September 2007 workers that had come to the states under the H-2B visa in past years could return and not be included in the limited number. Beckson said the end of that exemption could turn "detrimental" to New Jersey businesses.

"We don't rely on the H-2B visas," she said. "We do rely on the international students."

"They fill the seasonal part time work that we aren't able to pull from the local base," she said.

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