

Diamond Peak H2B visas don't come through

Friday, September 5, 2008

By Kyle Magin
Bonanza Staff Writer



The sun rises Thursday morning over Diamond Peak and the new lodge, which is still under construction, set to be completed this fall.

Bonanza Photo -Jen Schmidt

A federal foreign-worker visa program used by local ski resorts filled its quota in July, leaving many resorts looking for help elsewhere.

Last year local ski resorts, including Incline Village's Diamond Peak, were sent scrambling after a logjam in requests for government H2B visas created a shortage in skilled workers.

Because of this, Diamond Peak is not even seeking H2B employees for the 2008-2009 ski season, said Ed Youmans, Diamond Peak general manager.

The H2B program provides visas for skilled, seasonal foreign workers. Last year, resorts attempted to lobby Congress to expand the quota to include an exemption for H2B workers from the 2006-2007 season. That request was denied.

Bob Roberts, California Ski Industry Association executive director, said H2B workers are generally highly skilled either in maintenance/repair work or as valuable instructors.

Such is the case for Diamond Peak, where Youmans said the mountain lost its longtime assistant director of child ski instruction last year.

"It's been tough to fill (that position)," Youmans said. "We're trying to fill the gaps as we can, but losing those people will eventually catch up to us and hurt."

Roberts said more of the same, adding that most regional resorts couldn't get any H2B visas.

"These are great people who come here, work hard, and go home when the season is over," Roberts said. "A lot of resorts lost a lot of instructors with this program."

Youmans said the quota filled so early that he "couldn't even jokingly submit applications." Roberts said some of the larger resorts, such as the Vail chain (which owns South Lake Tahoe's Heavenly Mountain) were able to get their applications in early, but many smaller resorts couldn't.

Jessica VanPernis, the communications manager for Northstar-at-Tahoe resort, said their ownership group (which includes the Sierra-at-Tahoe resort) were able to submit applications for H2B workers early.

"Basically our human resources department was aware of the cap and submitted our H2B applications very early," VanPernis said. "Each year Northstar averages about 60-80 H2Bs each year."

Roberts said he expects the H2B crisis to possibly be fixed next year, but said the outlook is grim for the 2008-09 season.

"This is something we're not going to be able to get this year," Roberts said. "There is a large Latino caucus in Congress that is looking for some immigration reform and an easier route for people into the U.S. Until that gets solved, no other immigration matters will be taken care of."

Roberts said the ski industry does have lobbyists in Washington D.C. who are attempting to secure exemptions for former H2B employees and expand the quota cap on future crops of H2B workers.

Until then, Roberts said, many resorts will be out of luck.

"Each year the ski industry brings in more than 2,000 H2B workers and this year we only got about 10 percent of that," Roberts said. "This is definitely something that will hurt services at resorts this year."