

East End biz fears worker drought

BY DEBBIE TUMA
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

Thursday, January 24th 2008, 4:00 AM

Owners of East End tourist businesses fear that legal foreign summer workers permitted under a federal program since 1990 may not be available this year.

The H2B visa workers program allows people from other countries to work in the U.S. for as long as eight months at specified jobs and then return to their countries.

At its inception, the program authorized 66,000 workers to enter the U.S. annually. In 2005-2006, an exemption from the 66,000 cap was given for returning workers.

The exemption was renewed in 2006, allowing about 75,000 more returning workers, but it expired last year, a victim of the fight in Washington over border security.

"At this point, the original 66,000 cap is all that's being allowed for 2008, and that cap was reached on Jan. 2," said Paul Monte, CEO of Gurney's Inn Resort in Montauk, who last year employed 90 legal foreign workers out of a seasonal staff of 325.

Suffolk County Legislator Jay Schneiderman of Sag Harbor, who is leading an effort to restore the exemption for summer workers to return to the East End, said that the quota has been used up by ski resorts and other winter industries, shutting out the summer resorts.

In previous years, the 66,000 cap was split between the summer and winter resorts, and the returning workers came in over and above that number.

But this year, with no exemption for returning workers, the 66,000 allowable workers were granted on a first-come, first-served basis, and the winter businesses grabbed them first.

"It is critical that Congress and the Senate act quickly to pass this exemption so that this void of returning workers can be filled," said Schneiderman.

"A large amount of Long Island's local seasonal businesses rely on this federal program to get their summer help, since there is not an available work force locally to fill these service jobs."

Schneiderman said the East End gets more than 500 H2B workers, and the businesses have to petition for them individually.

These workers take jobs as waitresses, busboys, porters, housekeeping staff, kitchen help and landscapers at the area's many restaurants and hotels.

"This work force is critical to the survival of businesses out here," said Monte. "The ripple effect is that if we don't get these extra summer workers, we won't be able to make the money needed to stay open year round."

He said while many critics of this H2B program complain that it takes jobs away from Americans, the opposite is true. Monte said the additional legal summer workers enable him to make enough money to stay open year round, and also to staff year round with American help.

Laraine Creegan, executive director of the Montauk Chamber of Commerce, said her group plans to meet with other local chambers and business alliance members today about the issue.

"We need to brainstorm ways to bring back the H2B program, and also look at other options to bring in workers" from economically depressed areas of the U.S. and places such as Puerto Rico "where they don't need a visa," she said.