

Editorial: Give East End summer workers visas

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East End employers are being held hostage by the politics of immigration in Washington. At stake is the health of Long Island's summer tourist season. It will suffer unless federal officials allow roughly the same number of legal, temporary immigrant workers to fill jobs across the nation this year as in years past. Washington should free this critical, legal visa program from the choking tendrils of the debate over reform targeting illegal immigration.

At issue are H-2B visas, which allow foreign nationals to hold jobs in the United States for 10 months as seasonal, nonagricultural workers. On Long Island, they clean hotel rooms and swimming pools, wait tables and tend lawns, and generally allow hotels, resorts and restaurants to function. Before hiring visa holders, employers have to certify that there are no citizens in the local labor market who can fill the jobs.

The visas are capped at 66,000 a year. But under an exemption in place since 2005, visa holders who've worked here in any of the previous three years can return without counting against the cap. As a result, there have been about 130,000 H-2B workers in the country each year.

But Congress hasn't renewed the exemption this year. Some opponents simply want as few foreign workers here as possible. And unexpected opposition has come from the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, which favors an overhaul of immigration policy and worries that piecemeal action would ease the pressure for reform coming from employers.

But comprehensive reform, with a path to citizenship, died last year in a firestorm of opposition. It certainly won't be revisited before the next president is inaugurated. And even then, there's no guarantee that the volatile issue will be resolved.

With congressional action on the visa exemption stalled, Rep. Tim Bishop (D-Southampton) and scores of his colleagues have implored President George W. Bush to renew it by executive order. So far, nothing.

If that inaction continues past April 1, it could be too late to avoid compromising the tourist season. In that event, the Long Island economy, and those of other seasonal tourist areas across the country, will take the hit. With recession looming, that sort of self-inflicted wound makes no sense.