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## Hamptons facing shortage of seasonal workers

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About 20 Hamptons business owners, all of them facing a critical shortage of summer workers, met in Montauk yesterday to try to figure out ways to come up with hundreds of new employees in the next few months.

In the past they relied on foreign nationals to take the seasonal jobs in hotels and restaurants, in landscaping and other fields that cannot be filled through the local labor market. This year, the failure of Congress to pass an extension to the nation's H-2B temporary work visa program for returning workers means that none of them are coming back.

The business owners gathered at Gurney's Inn. The inn's chief executive, Paul Monte, is president of the Montauk Chamber of Commerce and one of the biggest H-2B employers on Long Island, hiring about 125 seasonal workers each year.

"Whenever this H-2B issue comes up, it seems to focus on Montauk," he said. "We have to come up with a plan B and C and D. There's a tremendous shortage of labor on the East End."

The shortage is nationwide. National trade groups estimate that up to 70,000 foreigners who had taken seasonal work last year will not be returning unless Congress takes action to restore the work permit exemption.

This year's cap on the 66,000 H-2B workers who would be allowed to come to the United States for the first time was reached on Jan. 2. And, because businesses cannot apply for such people more than 120 days before they would start to work, most resorts and other businesses in the Northeast could not file applications to get them.

Wilton Kelly, who started his home improvement and landscaping business in Montauk eight years ago, used five H-2B workers last year. This summer, he was hoping to hire 13. Like most of the other business owners in the room, he uses seasonal workers because there is little for them to do in the winter.

He sat in the back of one of the big, empty dining rooms at Gurney's Inn. Others were deciding to form committees to look into ways of using foreign student workers on temporary four-month visas. They also discussed finding H-2B workers now employed at winter resorts, and even recruiting people from other parts of the nation with high unemployment rates.

The business owners also agreed to write their elected officials urging them to change the laws to allow more seasonal workers into the country.