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Dispute over visas has ripples at Shore

A standoff in Congress over foreign labor could hurt tourism this summer, merchants warn.

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WILDWOOD - Accountants and sales reps for Morey's Piers could be on the amusement park's front line this summer, operating rides and working in guest relations.

And the double duty won't be by choice.

Morey's, where hundreds of seasonal foreign guest workers did everything from strap riders into the Tilt-A-Whirl to dish out ice cream in 2007, is caught in a congressional immigration standoff that some say could cripple New Jersey's \$37 billion tourism industry this year.

At issue is a critical shortage of H-2B seasonal-labor visas that last summer allowed about 7,500 foreigners to legally work at an estimated 700 businesses on the Jersey Shore.

"This is a huge economic issue for New Jersey," said Denise Beckson, director of operations and human resources at Morey's Piers, where the payroll grows to 1,500 in the summer.

Morey's, a landmark in this resort town, opened on Friday with a limited staff of mostly local employees. They are augmented by about a dozen college students from Thailand, whose J-1 visas will allow them to work for 90 days.

Hiring J-1 laborers has become a popular stopgap measure at the Shore, though employers would prefer H-2B workers whose six-month visas make them available in both of the "shoulder" seasons, before Memorial Day and for about a month after Labor Day.

"If you don't have enough employees, you ultimately can't provide proper service for your guests, and that could have both short-term and long-term impacts on New Jersey's tourism industry," Beckson said.

In 1991, the federal government set a quota of 66,000 seasonal H-2B visas per year - half issued in winter and half in summer - that allow residents of countries such as Ireland, the Czech Republic, Indonesia, South Africa, and Thailand to take mostly low-paying U.S. jobs that employers say are difficult to fill.

The laborers pay taxes and contribute to Social Security, then return home at the end of the season. By law, they must be paid prevailing wages. The H-2B visa program does not apply to seasonal agricultural workers.

Shore businesses "have historically tried to hire as many local kids as we can," said Michele Gillian, executive director of the Ocean City Regional Chamber of Commerce. "But there are usually more jobs than there are local students."

As tourist season has lengthened, hotels, restaurants, amusements and other businesses have relied less on American students because of their restrictive school schedules. And U.S. adults tend to seek higher-skilled year-round jobs, employers say.



AKIRA SUWA / Inquirer Staff Photographer
Panunee Chaopitiparn, 20, of Bangkok, at work in Wildwood. Chaopitiparn has a 90-day work visa; Shore businesses face a shortage of six-month workers needed to finish the season.

Not only is the annual H-2B cap too low, say the business owners, but regulations that prevent laborers from applying for a visa more than 120 days before starting work hurt their industries. The 33,000 visas made available on Jan. 2 were gone in one day, before workers who would arrive in spring were allowed to apply.

This year, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus added a wrinkle by blocking legislation that would have extended a measure, first passed in 2005, that exempted returning H-2B workers from the quota. With that exemption, some say, more than 225,000 visas for new and returning workers were granted last year. The caucus has said it is holding out for a comprehensive immigration overhaul.

Local employers fearful of a summer labor shortage say immigration reform is separate from the issue of H-2B work permits and have called on Sen. Robert Menendez (D., N.J.), a member of the caucus, to get things moving.

"We have tried to make it clear to Sen. Menendez the negative impact that this standoff can have on his own home state," said Beckson. The Morey's Piers official is a member of a group called Save Small Business that recently made the rounds in Washington, asking legislators to reform the work-visa system.

Menendez is sympathetic, he said, but he is not inclined to reform immigration laws piecemeal.

"I am aware of the problems that small businesses face. Clearly, there aren't enough Americans to do the number of important jobs in this country," he said in an e-mail last week.

"We need to see the bigger picture: We need a complete package to fix the [immigration] problem," Menendez said.

And the chance of that in a presidential-election year is virtually nil, say many political analysts.

In the meantime, recruitment and hiring at many Shore businesses have come to a virtual standstill.

Beckson and others from Morey's did their customary off-season recruitment tour of Asia and Western and Eastern Europe this year. In the past, they signed up H-2B workers who were typically college-age or just out of school. The company stayed competitive, she said, by offering dorm housing and slightly better pay than other Shore businesses.

Morey's had hoped to recruit from South Africa this year, but canceled its trip there due to the visa issue.

The company expects as few as 35 H-2B workers to be on its payroll this summer, Beckson said. She hopes to hire more three-month J-1 workers, and she will dragoon Morey's administrative personnel if things get tough, she said.

Jenkinson's Piers, in Point Pleasant Beach, is looking for more domestic labor.

"We had a job fair last month, and we're having another one this month to try to find more local kids to fill in positions where we may need them later on in the summer," said Marilou Halvorsen, director of recruitment for Jenkinson's, which will open in a few weeks, weather permitting.

Jenkinson's hires about 1,500 employees for its amusement piers, beaches and aquarium, Halvorsen said. Last year, about 100 were H-2Bs.

In January, Jenkinson's contacted ski resorts out West in hopes it could persuade H-2B employees there to stay in the country and work at the Shore. The complicated process of applying for a visa extension has led few to come forward, Halvorsen said.

Gillian, of the Ocean City chamber of commerce, said some in her organization are worried about what will happen if Memorial Day arrives and they aren't fully staffed.

A labor shortage would affect New Jersey businesses large and small, Gillian said. At Six Flags Great Adventure, in Jackson, N.J., about 400 of the park's 1,800 workers were on H-2B visas in 2006, according to the most recent statistics available from the state Department of Labor.

"It could be devastating and seriously hurt our Shore communities if these workers can't return," Gillian said. "And it seems like we really won't know for sure what the numbers will be until the season gets into full swing in June."