



# THE BLOCK ISLAND TIMES

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## A family friendly summer, all agree

High-speed to keep running weekends; worker crisis looms

By Judy Tierney

Members of the Chamber of Commerce and the Tourism Council wrapped the 2007 summer season in glowing terms, calling it “mellow ... family friendly, and ... a vast improvement over past seasons,” at their second joint meeting held at the Spring House Monday night.

That — and the announcement that the high speed ferry would run weekends through Thanksgiving — were good news. But, there were also concerns about changes in immigration law making it difficult to recruit summer workers; and perennial worry about how to feed winter visitors.

Addressing the approximately 35 members in attendance, Chamber President Steve Draper said, “Interstate Navigation, the Block Island Police, the Chamber and Tourism Council worked together for these very positive changes.”

His sentiment was seconded later in the meeting by taxi driver Monica Hull Shea. “The police presence was phenomenal,” she said. “Vin Carlone should get a pat on the back.” This sparked a show of support for the chief.

Hull Shea said her fares included people “who used to go to Nantucket and the Vineyard, but were priced out,” and she cautioned businesses to be “conscious of costs” so the same phenomenon does not occur here.

“The old image was of Block Island as a party place ... now, it is of family-oriented people,” police officer Paul Deane said. “They will spend more time in shops, eat at restaurants, rent bicycles, and they don’t go to bars.”

The Tourism Council and chamber are looking ahead to the Christmas Stroll, to be held November 23, 24 and 25. Council President John Cullen said he hopes the stroll will become an annual event for people to return to the island.

An announcement by Megan Moran, representing Interstate Navigation, that the high-speed ferry will continue running weekends to and from Point Judith until Thanksgiving was met with a round of applause.

Cullen explained the charge of the Tourism Council is to promote tourism. He is aware, he said, that some island residents are expressing feelings of “don’t bring more people here,” but the legislature created the organization to market Block Island. Advertising has been geared toward the shoulder seasons, and has appeared on Providence buses, Boston trolleys, and as small ads in several large newspapers. This summer, the council also sponsored, among other things, a community support officer, a visit by the tall ship Picton Castle, and student scholarships.

More advertising promoting nautical activities — boating, fishing and sailing — was requested by Laura Puckett, who runs a charter sailing business. Puckett was critical of the lack of services for New Harbor boaters, who, she said, far outnumber the people who stay in Old Harbor.

“Everywhere on the East Coast, towns charge for the dinghy dock. This should be looked at,” she said, indicating that more services could be paid for with additional harbor's income.

On a smaller scale, she suggested the addition of solar-heated showers to the bathrooms next to Smuggler’s Cove. Puckett was encouraged to come forward with proposals for additional services, as that is how the Old Harbor project was initiated.

Tourism Council member Ted Merritt added that even the launch service has already stopped for the year in New Harbor. “In spite of it all, people love the place,” Merritt said.

Whence employees?

Looking to next year's season, Julie Fuller from the National Hotel urged everyone to sign a petition she circulated regarding changes to the congressional bills covering foreign workers. Senate Bill 988 and House Bill 1843 expire this week, which means H2B visas for all seasonal foreign workers will become available October 1. Businesses can apply only within 120 days of when they need the workers, so summer businesses will not be able to apply at this time.

Fuller said last year the cap of 66,000 workers was met within six weeks, and she had to rely on returning workers from the previous year. This year returning workers will fall under the cap, and Fuller said, "we may not even get last year's."

Foreign workers have replaced American college students as employees in resorts over the last 10 years. According to Cullen, "There's no turning back. International workers are an absolute necessity."

Echoing this, Draper said businesses can't find American students to hire. The government requires them to advertise for help in major U.S. newspapers before opening the jobs to international help, but there aren't applicants.

"I don't know where your kids and grandkids are," Draper told the group, "but they're not coming here."

Slim pickings

Moving on from the shoulder to the winter season, those gathered debated the need for a winter restaurant not connected to a bar. Beachead owner Kimberly Ward said she is closing at Thanksgiving. The Beachead lost significant money last winter, said Ward, adding that the community did not support it by coming in.

"I'll miss not being here," she said. "I want to support it and I think we need it, but last year we only had two good weekends."

The Beachead will open for five days near New Year's weekend, however.

Yellow Kittens Manager Dan Cahill said the Kittens would also close January 2. "There aren't enough people here to open five days a week. We need more than five people a night to be viable," he said.

Claire and Steve McQueeney, recalling when they ran a bed-and-breakfast, said those that stay open can't rent rooms if there is no place to eat.

"When I was on the Tourism Council, we talked about paying a restaurant a bonus to stay open, but we couldn't decide which one to give it to. Now, I think anyone who raises a hand should get it," Claire McQueeney said.

Cahill disagreed with the idea of a subsidy. "You'll open a can of worms giving \$20,000 to a restaurant. Come Thanksgiving, it slows down to a slow stop. We're not Miami Beach," he said.

Cullen thought a subsidy might be a way to get started, but Merritt said right now the Tourism Council doesn't have a sizable check to give someone. Tourism Council Executive Director Jessica Willi explained that the bed tax goes to them, but a certain percentage has to be spent on marketing.

"Maybe we need to do it in baby steps," Jim Murphy said, suggesting that the council and chamber make sure some restaurants will be open for the Christmas Stroll, and Groundhog Day, when people come over to the island.

Dugan closed the meeting with the announcement that the Tour Rhode Island campaign had won a tourist industry award, equivalent to the "Oscars of the tourist industry."