



Island businesses adapt to visa dearth

By Judy Tierney • Tuesday, May 20, 2008

The island's larger businesses have been able to hire summer staff despite Congressional inaction on an increase in the number of H-1B and H-2B visas available for foreign workers brought into the United States.

The current nationwide cap of 33,000 returning foreign worker visas for the summer months was filled by January, and efforts to pass House Bill 1843 or Senate Bill 988, called the "Save our Small and Seasonal Business Act," were not successful.

That means some businesses will be without some familiar faces this summer.

The Manisses, 1661 and Oar lost a large group of Jamaican staffers. Many had expected to return, and even left belongings such as clothing and televisions here. Steve Draper says he might have to mail what he can back to them.

In their place, general manager Elizabeth Connor says, the Manisses has hired approximately 20 Jamaican workers who were already in the United States. Those workers were able to extend the time on their visas.

At the Mohegan Cafe, Harbor Grill and Block Island Reservations, Zena Clark, like Connors, also filled open slots with H-2B workers already in the country, hired European students on J-1 visas and American students as well. Although she was initially concerned, she has been successful in her hiring.

Steve Filippi, president of Ballard's Inn, says he is "all set" for staff. "We tapped into more Americans than usual," he says.

Filippi recruited through their website, www.ballardsinn.com, which has an employment application that can be completed and submitted online. He has filled about 20 open slots with college students and industry professionals, and return workers filled the other 80 percent. Filippi says the foreign workers come in on student visas still available.

At the National Hotel, college students from the states and abroad have filled the available slots, and at the Block Island Grocery, Mary Jane Balser says their foreign help all come in with the student J-1 visas. They were not affected by changes in the H-2B visas. The Spring House reports it, too, is all set with employees, but didn't elaborate.