



Visa cap threatens island businesses

By Peter Voskamp • Monday, February 18, 2008 2:52 PM EST

Block Island businesses, like many other seasonal communities around the state and country, are anxiously waiting to see if Congress will renew the returning worker exemptions to the cap on H-2B visas, as it has done every year since 2005.

Summer resort destinations like Block Island have grown reliant upon foreign workers to keep the businesses up and running in the summers.

The current nationwide cap of 33,000 visas for the summer months was already filled by last month, and efforts to pass House Bill 1843 or Senate Bill 988, called the "Save our Small and Seasonal Business Act," have so far been unsuccessful.

Andrew Solomon, a New York-based consultant working with some of the island businesses, said, "It is bleak, it is really bleak." The legislation is stuck in "complete deadlock," he said, and is being used for "political ping-pong."

The issue has been mired in Capitol Hill infighting about immigration legislation.

Julie Fuller, manager of the National Hotel, explains that businesses may apply for H-2B workers only 120 days before they would be needed. Island businesses that don't begin their summer seasons until the end of May, therefore, are out of luck.

Those opposing the cap exemption say that jobs should go to unemployed Americans first.

But Fuller says the days of American college students lining up to take summer jobs on the island is mostly a thing of the past. When it comes to cleaning, dishwashing and chambermaiding, "they don't want those jobs," she says.

Ballard's Inn president Steve Filippi agrees, and says that many college-age youth are now thinking ahead about careers and are taking internships with companies or law firms on the mainland.

("This is not an easy process," Rhode Island Hospitality and Tourism Association head Dale Venturini told the Times in October. "Employers would never go through so much work if they could find the employees they need here in the States.")

Filippi says that as the H-2B situation currently stands, of its complement of 80 workers each summer, Ballard's could potentially lose 20 core staff members from the Philippines. Ballard's does have many foreign workers returning with J-1 student visas, says Filippi, and they would hopefully help take up the slack.

The J-1 visas are not affected by the current legislation.

Fuller would also have to fill a 20-worker gap, at least 10 of whom have longtime experience at the hotel, one as an employee for eight years.

Elizabeth Connor, general manager for the Hotel Manisses, said, "We're in a wait and see mode." If the exemption is not granted, she said, the 1661 Inn, the Oar and the Manisses — which have a combined 130 employees — would lose 25 workers who return annually from Jamaica.

According to Filippi, while things could be rough for island businesses, places like Cape Cod and Newport will be hit even more severely. Maryland and its crab industry would be hit hardest of all, says Filippi.

The Rhode Island Congressional delegation is in favor of the exemption, and Sen. Jack Reed recently met with the R.I. Hospitality and Tourism Association on the subject.

The American Hotel & Lodging Association is planning to place ads in Washington D.C.-area publications that read:

"Our nation's small and seasonal businesses cannot operate without H2B workers. If temporary workers aren't available during the peak seasons, hotels, resorts, landscapers, entertainment venues, restaurants, and many other small businesses will be

forced to cut back or close down this summer.”

In an email sent to Fuller this week, Sen. Jack Reed wrote, “I recognize the importance of the H-2B program in Rhode Island. While we need to have a comprehensive, enforceable, and practical review of our failed immigration laws, it is my hope that the Congress will pass legislation to extend this program. You can be assured that I will continue to monitor this situation with your thoughts in mind.”