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Work visas in peril

Area businesses rely on migrant workers

By Dawn Bryant
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Don't be surprised if you see reduced hours at area restaurants and attractions next summer, or have to wait longer for service.

Businesses may have to make drastic cutbacks because of changes to a popular visa program that brings thousands of international workers to the Grand Strand and other U.S. destinations that need extra hands.

The move could further hamper a service industry already struggling to find enough housekeepers, waiters and landscapers, say tourism leaders.

Cuts in the number of workers who can use H2B seasonal-worker visas come as the Grand Strand - facing another 2,500 new jobs to fill when the Hard Rock Park opens in the spring - is increasingly turning overseas and to neighboring counties such as Marion and Williamsburg for workers to keep the beach's \$5 billion tourism industry humming during peak season.

Taking away some of the H2Bs could push the industry over the edge, causing cutbacks in operations and service that visitors could start to notice, said Pauline Levesque, CEO of the Myrtle Beach Area Hospitality Association.

"You will definitely see a reduction in times places are open or longer waits in lines for tables at restaurants, check in," she said. "The impact would be huge - dramatic. People now are making it work, but how far can they stretch those resources? It would definitely be a crisis for us."

Provision to expire

The "returning worker" provision of the H2B visa, which allows more than 180,000 temporary workers into the U.S. each year, is set to expire Sept. 30. A plan that would have made the temporary worker provision permanent failed as part of an immigration bill in the Senate last month.

That makes hospitality leaders nervous. Grand Strand and state officials met Friday in Myrtle Beach to hash out a plan and create the "H2B Visa Coalition," which will meet with Congress members and write letters urging them to extend the worker provision.

But they might be out of luck. Congress isn't expected to discuss the issue any time soon.

"As of right now, there is really nothing looming out there," said Amanda Reynolds, a spokesman for U.S. Rep. Henry Brown. "[Brown] has always been supportive of expanding the visas. They are just so necessary. ... But it's not something that is coming down the pike in the House."

Foreign students

Local officials don't have specific numbers of how many international students - from places such as Bulgaria and Poland - spend their summers working on the Grand Strand. But they know that they can't do without them.

The students get real-life experience in tourism while working on their English. Businesses say the students are lifesavers: They staff hard-to-fill jobs with enthusiasm and solid work ethics.

The Avista Resort in North Myrtle Beach turned to international workers for the first time this year, unable to find enough locals who had transportation or were willing to stick with the jobs for more than a few days, general manager Jim Eggen said. About 60 of the resort's 375 workers are from overseas and work a variety of jobs, including hauling trash, cleaning rooms and serving drinks at the pool.

"For me, that [number of international workers] is significant," Eggen said. "And we still don't have enough people."

The program has worked so well, Eggen wants to bring students back next summer - maybe even more of them.

"We don't have an option," he said. "[If we couldn't use as many foreign workers] it would have a dramatic impact because we literally would not have enough staff for the summertime. We are very concerned. Right now everybody is going overseas. It is a big thing."

More workers needed

The reliance on outside workers is expected to continue as more jobs are created at places such as the Hard Rock Park and Market Common, both of which plan to open in the spring. About 2,500 people will work at the theme park during the summer.

Park officials are already developing training programs and planning to hit job fairs at regional colleges to recruit next summer's employees.

"We know we have a challenge ahead of us, but we know we need to be aggressive," said Bonita Lloyd, Hard Rock Park's vice president of human resources. "I don't think we've left a rock unturned."

Drawing workers from overseas and surrounding counties is a must for the Grand Strand to keep up with its growth, said Don Schunk, a research economist at Coastal Carolina University.

"It's a challenge, certainly," he said. "We will probably become even more dependent on bringing workers in."

With the pressure on, hoteliers and other hospitality businesses are trying to hatch plans to make it easier to tap outside workers. Transportation is one of the biggest hurdles in getting available workers to the beach from higher-unemployment areas such as Williamsburg and Marion counties. Many of them already ride buses to the beach.

EGGEN, of the Avista Resort, is so concerned he's considering buying a bus to provide transportation - managers now often pick up workers who live nearby and carpool in. Another option being considered is for the resort to buy a property in a place such as Whiteville, N.C., where many of his workers live, and provide subsidized rent and transportation to work.

As a long-term solution, officials need to look to the schools to teach work-ethics and skills, which would produce more qualified workers, Schunk said.

"The challenge is going to be making sure we have the right type of worker," he said.

The Crown Reef Resort in Myrtle Beach has used foreign workers for about six years, and they now make up about 30 percent of the resort's employees, President Woody Crosby said. He's not sure what will happen next summer if he can't rely on that help.

"We lean on that heavily. Some people just don't want to do this type of work in hotels," he said. "We'll have to think about different ways of solving that problem. And I don't have the answer."

Jim Eggen | General manager of the Avista Resort

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