

Hilton Head Island - Bluffton, SC

Businesses counting on H2-B visas

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Hilton Head Island businesses could face a worker crunch next summer if a popular visa program that brings hundreds of foreign workers to the island doesn't get renewed by Congress.

Local hospitality officials estimate a few hundred workers, many from Jamaica, use "H2-B" seasonal-worker visas every year to fill jobs for positions from housekeeping to cooking at local hotels and resorts.

Just 66,000 of the visas are available every year from the federal government, and demand for them far exceeds the supply.

This year, a provision that would have made the returning worker provision permanent failed as part of the comprehensive immigration bill.

Even though the federal fiscal year ends Sept. 30, most people are confident the provision that allows returning workers not to count against the cap will be reinstated.

Rep. Joe Wilson, R-S.C., is one of the co-sponsors of a bill in the House of Representatives to keep the returning worker provision. There is a similar bill in the Senate.

"Congressman Wilson believes it is crucial to balance the need between securing our borders and providing employers with a temporary, legal workforce when needed," said Dino Teppara, chief of staff for Wilson.

Chris Scheriff, director of human resources at The Westin Resort on the island, said 95 of the 428 employees at the resort during the peak season are on H2-B visas.

The resort makes every effort to hire local workers, but there just aren't enough to fill all of the seasonal positions, Scheriff said.

If the H2-B workers aren't available next year, reducing hours or service will be a last resort for businesses here, said Scheriff and Diana Brown, director of human resources at the Hilton Oceanfront Resort.

"I like to think positively to come up with solutions, but I'm not sure what they'd be," Brown said.