

## Trip to aquarium to cost a bit more

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The **South Carolina Aquarium** just opened its new **Camp Carolina** exhibit, but if you want to see it after today, it's going to cost you an extra buck or two.

The nonprofit, the area's most-popular attraction, is raising ticket prices tomorrow: Adult rates will increase from \$16 to \$17, a 6.3 percent bump; senior tickets will go from \$14 to \$16, a 15 percent nudge; and kids tickets (ages 2-11) will increase from \$8 to \$10, a 25 percent jump.

It should be noted that the aquarium hasn't raised its rates on children in four years, although the increases still outpace inflation by a healthy margin. Senior and adult fares were last bumped up in January 2007, by 8 percent and 6 percent, respectively.

The aquarium said it looked at its peers nationwide and other Charleston attractions in coming up with the new prices. The facility typically gets a little over half of its revenue at the turnstiles.

Will lobby for labor

Spring is here. Lowcountry tourism is blossoming. But the annual harvest of seasonal labor from abroad is meager.

The country's 66,000 visas for unskilled temporary workers were spoken for the first week of January and a provision to pass out more is tied up with the rest of the immigration debate in D.C.

"You've got somewhat of a stalemate," said **Tom Sponseller**, CEO of **The Hospitality Association of South Carolina**.

And the more visitors that come, the more anxious the state's restaurants, hotels, golf courses and attractions get.

"Without help, they can't open all their locations," Sponseller explained.

The places hurt the most are big resorts like **Kiawah** that are too far from an urban hub to round up a steady stream of dishwashers, maids and maintenance folks. Kiawah has typically welcomed a few hundred foreigners every year on the so-called H-2B visas, which is no easy feat.

Companies must prove that they attempted to hire a U.S. citizen for any position that they seek to fill from abroad. They are required to pay foreign workers a commensurate salary, and they can't apply for an H-2B visa more than four months before the worker is needed.

Grand Strand tourism companies have about 5,500 H-2B workers at any given point in the year, according to the **Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce**.

Lawmakers eased the labor crunch somewhat in May 2005 when they passed a provision that workers who obtained an H-2B in the past three years won't count toward the annual 66,000 cap. But last year, that legislation expired and Congress is having a hard time muscling it through again.

Last week, a Louisiana representative filed a "discharge petition" that would force the issue to a vote. If it gets enough signatures, Charleston's hospitality industry could get a break. Sponseller, meanwhile, was making sure the South Carolina delegates put their names on the roster, but, as the cherry blossoms passed ripe and started dropping, he wasn't bullish on the timing.

"Even if this goes through, it's going to take weeks, if not months, for companies ... to justify that they can't fill these jobs otherwise," Sponseller said. "By the time you prove all that, our season could be over."

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