

December 16, 2007

Where are all the workers? Island could face labor shortage this summer

By JIM FABER
jfaber@islandpacket.com
843-706-8137

Congress might vote next week on a measure that could stave off an impending staffing crunch on Hilton Head Island next summer.

At issue is the "H2-B" guest worker program, which allows 66,000 seasonal workers to come into the country each year for jobs that local labor markets can't fill.

Demand for the workers is far beyond the allotted number of visas, so, in 2005 and 2006, Congress passed provisions allowing workers who have previously come to the U.S. under H2-B to come back without counting toward that cap.

This year, that exemption still hasn't passed.

Kevin Bishop, a spokesman for Sen. Lindsey Graham, said there's a 50-50 chance the exemption could be attached to and passed as part of a series of appropriations bills that will go before the House and Senate next week.

Graham, Sen. Jim DeMint and 34 other senators of both parties were co-sponsors of a bill to put the exemption into effect for the next five years.

"Sen. Graham understands the importance of this to South Carolina's coastal regions, especially those that rely on tourism," Bishop said.

But that bill, as well as a similar one in the House that included Rep. Joe Wilson as a co-sponsor, haven't gone anywhere.

DeMint took up the issue in his blog last week, writing: "Many businesses will be forced to cancel events, operate at partial capacity or have their full-time staff work overtime if something is not done soon."

Another legislative source said it was unlikely that the "H2-B" extension would be passed by the time Congress adjourns for the year next week.

On Hilton Head, businesses depend on 400 to 600 people getting those visas each summer. At some resorts, more than 30 percent of the peak-season employees are using the visas.

The Hilton Head Island-Bluffton Chamber of Commerce worked with human resource directors at local resorts to set up a phone and fax bank three weeks ago to remind legislators of the importance of the visas.

"We're continually pushing it to the forefront as a priority," said Charlie Clark, vice president of communications for the chamber.

Earl Nightingale, general manager of the Hilton Oceanfront Resort on the island, sent his director of human resources, Diana Brown, to Washington, D.C., last week to push the importance of the visas.

"I do have a high level of confidence our legislators will find a way to get this done," Nightingale said.

Since the visa process takes about four months, passing the extension now could still mean delays in getting seasonal workers to the island in time for the tourist season.

Nightingale says his optimism is just a gut feeling.

"Our (alternate) plan would be to go back to all the U.S. and international universities and put a push on for J1 visas (for foreign students) and college internship programs," Nightingale said.

But, even that could fall short if most resorts are looking at the same alternatives.