

Summer Employers Shut Out by Foreign Worker Cap; Still Seeking Staffing Solutions

By Ryan Schlehuber

A federally mandated cap for allowing a limited number of H2B visa workers into the country each year has already been filled, shutting out northern Michigan seasonal summer tourism businesses, but local employers say a worker transfer program has made it easier than last year to find workers for this summer. They also are hopeful that a bill introduced in Congress last week will reinstate the special visa exemption program that allowed returning workers to reenter the country and not be counted on the nation-wide hiring limit.

Some business owners in the Straits area say they're able to call back last summer's foreign national workers who spent the winter working at other resort areas in the U.S., a program the workers can take advantage of for only three years. Many of the H2B visa workers are specially trained in hospitality trades, and they come from a variety of countries, including Jamaica. This workforce has been employed by Straits area businesses during busy summer months since the mid-1990s to offset the shortfall in the available local labor force.

Local employers say they face higher traveling costs to recruit workers from winter resort areas this year.

Brian Bailey's traveling plans include trips to winter resorts in Colorado, Arizona, and Orlando and Naples, Florida, to recruit workers for the upcoming summer season

for Chippewa Hotel Waterfront and Lilac Tree Hotel, both on Mackinac Island.

Although his businesses, like many in the Straits area, now face more traveling costs to recruit and must increase hourly wages for each vacant position to compete with other summer businesses, Mr. Bailey is finding the process of securing workers for the year easier than last year.

"Last year was extremely difficult trying to find a labor force," said Mr. Bailey, "but this year we're much better off because much of the base of our new employees from last year is returning."

Between 75% and 80% of his workforce from last year is returning, said Mr. Bailey, and he credits that to new working relationships with recruiting agencies and with winter resort employers which have helped locate available H2B visa workers already in the country. These workers can transfer from one seasonal business to another for up to three years before having to return to their homeland.

Grand Hotel's John Hulett, who is in charge of filling more than 600 positions for the Island summer resort, isn't as close to hitting the panic button this winter as he was last winter, either.

"The process is better this year. We're in a better position to fill our staff needs," said Mr. Hulett. "Last year was a hard learning experience for us."

The federal government controls how many foreign national workers

can enter the country on the visa program. Local summer businesses have been trying to return their H2B visa working staff since Congress let lapse a 2004 exemption that allows foreign workers with approved visas for the past three years to not be counted against the 66,000-worker nation-wide visa cap.

Senators Barbara Mikulski (D-Maryland) and Arlen Specter (R-Pennsylvania) introduced legislation Thursday, February 5, to reinstate the H2B exemption provision for three years.

"This bill protects our borders, protects American jobs, and rewards people who play by the rules," said Senator Mikulski. "Without these

seasonal workers, many businesses will not survive. They'll be forced to limit services, lay off permanent U.S. workers or, worse yet, close their doors."

Congressman Bart Stupak is expected to introduce a similar bill in the House.

In the meantime, businesses are adapting in other ways, using other

programs to recruit foreign nationals, such as the Q visa, which brings workers in on a cultural exchange program, used last year by Grand Hotel for several Austrian chefs.

Employers are also recruiting more American college students, and European students under J1

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Students Learn Math Skills by Counting to 100 Days

Celebrating 100 days of school, learning activities of St. Ignace Elementary School students focused on the number 100. Through Wednesday, February 11, students counted, measured, pasted, made 100-item projects, laid end-to-end down the hallway, and helped build an igloo. For Patrice Mackin's fourth grade class, everything totaled 100, including houses made of craft sticks, signs created with bottle tops, and vests decorated with candy. The students shared the creations with classmates. Fourth grade students are Alysse Bentley (front row, from left), Kenny Nayback, Eileen Getzen, Jared Mountain; (middle) Lucas Hammond, Eric Ward, Sheridan Bigger, Troy Hansen, Chase Kerridge; (back) Jared Cece, Lauren Yoder, James Cardin, and Jordan Osmon.



The 100-milk-jug igloo project quickly grew to more than 300 jugs, said first grade teacher Sherrie Gustafson. The igloo grows daily with more donated jugs. Retired teacher Carol Miller is volunteering her time to build the structure. Students pictured are Casey Brake (from left), Allison Colegrove, Reid Marshall, Nicholas Allers, Emma Feleppa, Logan Rickley (back, right), and Hunter Brown.



Pasting 100 colorful shapes, and putting 100 push-pins into squares was a fun project for kindergarten students celebrating their first 100 days of school in St. Ignace. The students in Lil McDonald's and Nicki Lee's classes happily display their work. Pictured are Chloe Marlatt (from left, front row), Chloe Convery; (back) Regan Mortensen, Jackson Ingalls, and Hallie Marshall.

Springsteen Gets Top Rating From St. Ignace School Board

By Karen Gould

Impartial, approachable, visible, and informed are words board members at St. Ignace Area Schools used for Superintendent Mike Springsteen during their annual evaluation of the school administrator. Board members said Mr. Springsteen meets and exceeds their expectations. They commended him for his ability to communicate with the board, staff, and the community. They were specifically impressed with his fiscal responsibility and his fairness.

The board also evaluated its own performance during a workshop held before its regular meeting Wednesday, February 11, giving itself a "B" grade, overall. Board members cited their weakness as being unable to take advantage of professional development opportunities. Most of the classes are held in the Lansing or Detroit areas and travel for them would require time from their jobs, plus travel expenses for the school.

In January, the board approved moving forward with a detailed feasibility study to convert the districts heating system to one that uses woody biomass fuels. During Wednesday's meeting, Mr. Springsteen told the board the Upper Peninsula Resource Conservation and Development Council had selected St. Ignace for the second phase of the project.

Four Upper Peninsula schools already use similar woody biomass systems, said Mr. Springsteen, including Whitefish Township

Schools, North Dickinson Schools, Powers North Central, and Calumet Schools.

Budget work is underway for the 2009/2010 school year, said school business manager Kathy McLeod. In late May or early June she expects to have more information, but currently she is projecting a \$53,000 budget deficit for this year. The shortfall is no surprise to the board, as the school had estimated a \$176,000 shortfall in this year's budget.

The board should have a tentative budget to review in April, said Mr. Springsteen. The budget must be adopted no later than June 30.

An informal count of students taken earlier that day tallies 663 students, which is 15 fewer than in September. Most of the drop in enrollment, he said, has come in the elementary school as families have moved out of the area.

The district will contract with the Eastern Upper Peninsula Intermediate School District for Internet access, maintenance, and Web site hosting. The cost is \$55,251.49, of which 70% is paid by Universal Service Funds. The federal funds are available to assist rural schools with technology. Last year, the school paid \$57,714 for the three services and received the 70% federal discount.

A LaSalle High School student was suspended for the remainder of the school year. The student was disciplined for a variety of

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Mackinaw City Budget Hearing Set

By Karen Gould

Mackinaw City Village Council considers its proposed general fund for 2009/2010 conservative, with most of the \$342,879 increase in spending over last year related to the planned purchase of a new fire truck.

During its Thursday, February 5, meeting, Council set a public budget hearing for 7 p.m. Thursday, February 19, followed by the council's regular meeting.

The village is allocating approximately \$300,000 for the purchase of the fire truck, Village Manager Jeff Lawson told *The St. Ignace News*. Also included in the general fund, he said, are repairs to the roof at Fire Station II on Pond Street and heating system repair for the garage at Village Hall.

For the coming year, the general fund totals \$1,858,509, up from \$1,515,630 this year.

Property taxes comprise 66% of the revenue the village receives, said Jim Alford, who chairs the Finance Committee. Village property is valued at \$114 million.

The village anticipates collecting \$1,229,000 in property taxes, up from \$1,211,000.

The village continues to budget for legal costs with cases pending before the Michigan Tax Tribunal. Case outcome could have the potential to reduce the taxable value of some properties and would then decrease the village tax base.

The Finance Committee, said Mr. Alford, also discussed the possibility adding a staff member who would be responsible for zoning enforcement. Village staff members are looking into the job details before the proposal is brought before the council.

Council is expected to adopt the budget at its Thursday meeting.

Cedarville, DeTour School Boards Remove Superintendent Limitations

By Jonathan Eppley

School boards in Cedarville and DeTour have removed some limitations placed on the duties of their shared superintendent.

The Les Cheneaux Community Schools Board of Education agreed to delete a clause in the Dual Superintendency Cooperative Agreement with DeTour Area Schools, with regard to the limitations of duties of superintendent Rod Goehmann, who is superintendent for both districts, at its Monday, February 16, meeting.

The clause, 4.4(b): Limitations on Superintendent Duties, says Mr. Goehmann is not allowed to recommend the "allocation of

costs of any joint purchase, joint employment, or other joint programs between the school districts."

Mr. Goehmann said the section was deleted, "so possible discussions and communications could be flowing between the districts and so I could be involved."

He said when the co-op agreement was originally drafted in 2006, it leaned away from his involvement and interaction between the two districts to eliminate any bias.

"It helps to eliminate any bias on my part. Bias toward Cedarville or bias toward DeTour, on whatever the subject might be," he said.

Computer Chip Puts Engadine Inventor Ross Freeman in Hall of Fame

By Jonathan Eppley

The technology in almost every electronic device used today can be traced to the integrated circuit.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the integrated circuit, and the National Inventors Hall of Fame in Akron, Ohio, is inducting 14 inventors who contributed to making it possible or advancing the technology, including late Engadine inventor Ross Freeman.

In 1984, Mr. Freeman invented the field programmable gate array, a computer chip that can be reprogrammed to change the way it functions through a series of logic gates. They are used in a variety of applications, including local area networking and cell phone networks.

That same year, Mr. Freeman co-founded a Silicon Valley-based company, called Xilinx, with Bernie Vonderschmitt and Jim Barnett to manufacture these programmable chips.

The company grew as the cost of

transistors decreased, making the gate array more affordable and a popular alternative to custom-built computer chips. The company now holds more than 2,000 patents and controls more than 50% of the multi-billion-dollar programmable logic device industry.

Before beginning his career, Mr. Freeman earned a bachelor's degree in physics from Michigan State University in 1969 and a master's degree from the University of Illinois in 1971. After college, he also served two years as a volunteer mathematics and electronics teacher in the Peace Corps in Ghana.

He was born and grew up in Engadine and was graduated from Engadine High School. Mr. Freeman died in 1989.

His mother, Ethel Freeman, who lives in Engadine, said she is proud of her son's accomplishments and induction to the Hall of Fame.

"Just as much as I would have if it had been honored right away. I



Engadine inventor Ross Freeman will be posthumously inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame at a ceremony in May. (Freeman family photograph)

She said her son was very passionate about his work and his inventions, which were too many to count.

"I have no idea" how many inventions he made, she said.

The 2009 inductees were announced in Washington, D.C., Wednesday, February 11, and will be honored in an induction ceremony in Mountain View, California, May 2.

Thirteen other inventors from across the country were inducted into the Hall of Fame.

"Virtually every electronic device in use today relies on advances in integrated circuit technology. By honoring the accomplishments of this year's inductees, we are acknowledging their contributions that have done no less than make our modern way of life possible," said Fred Allen, vice president of Selection for the Hall of Fame, in a statement to the press.