

Head of Hilton Head Restaurant group says island is ‘disaster zone’ in Washington Post

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Hilton Head Island's workforce shortage was discussed in a recent Washington Post article exploring President Trump's claims to expand a program that vets employees' legal status to work in the United States.

"The whole island is a disaster zone right now," Steve Carb, SERG Restaurant Group president, said in the article. "It's been a nightmare."

The restaurant group scaled back its usage of the Poseidon Rooftop Bar and has needed to close sections of Skull Creek Dockside at times in recent months. Officials with the group have claimed it is due to not having enough employees to provide quality service.

In the Washington Post article, Carb says the restaurant group is short about 100 people needed to run its 12 restaurants optimally.

Pay at the restaurants also has increased in recent years, Carb tells the newspaper.

The hourly wage for dishwashers has increase from \$10 to \$13 in recent years. Line cooks' pay has increased to \$15 to \$18 from \$13 to \$15.

Higher pay and additional overtime also means a hit to the menu, the article says. For example, smaller shrimp and raising the price of fish and chips by \$0.30.

The article takes a look at the E-Verify system — a tool used by businesses to check if an employee is legally able to work in the country. It states Trump promoted a national expansion of the program during his campaign but has not pushed it as a solution since in office.

South Carolina is one of eight states that requires businesses to use E-verify. The article claims many of the states are not enforcing the law. It refers to a Cato Institute study that shows 55 percent of new hires in South Carolina were not screened through E-Verify in the second quarter of 2017.

The Island Packet and Beaufort Gazette reported last year that about 1 percent of Beaufort County's employers were audited to ensure they were following the E-Verify law each year by the S.C. Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation.

Carb, in the Washington Post article, mentions he is unable to hire illegal immigrants.

"There are people who are willing to work and pay taxes, but they can't get jobs because we can't legally hire them," Carb says in the story.

He added that other restaurants will hire them.

Nick Unangst, corporate chef and partner with SERG, also told the Island Packet last year that the use of E-verify was adding to the workforce shortage in the region.

"E-verify has created a vacuum and there is no solution yet," Unangst said at that time.

SERG officials and other organizations have also claimed that affordable housing and limited transportation are part of the issue.

Multiple businesses in Beaufort County have said that a shortage in workers have impacted their business in the past year.

Massage Envy closed earlier this month on Hilton Head. The owner cited a shortage in workers as the reason. He claimed the cause was difficulty in finding housing.

Other businesses such Covert Aire and Palmetto Pool Contracting said in April they have struggled to find skilled labor.

Hospitality managers on Hilton Head recently formed a group to combat what they say is a growing problem.