Economic development only part of the employment story



JESSICA NELMS | THE JOURNAL

BorgWarner has seen an increase of 150 jobs at its Seneca plant since December.

BY NORMAN CANNADA
THE JOURNAL

SENECA — While the number of Oconee County residents with jobs is up and unemployment has dropped to an all-time low, not all of those jobs have been created in Oconee County.

Employment and unemployment statistics are based on where the people live, not where the jobs are, according to Richard Blackwell, executive director of Oconee Economic Alliance. So an Oconee County resident who works in Pickens, Anderson, Greenville county or anywhere else in the state still counts as an employed person in Oconee County.

"I definitely don't claim credit for the unemployment going down, nor am I claiming credit for the unemployment rate getting 5.1 percent," Blackwell said, referring to numbers that show unemployment among Oconee County residents has dropped from 10.1 percent in 2011 to a current rate of 5.1 percent.

Other statistics from the S.C. Department of Employment and Workforce show that 29,647 Oconee residents are currently employed inside or outside the county as compared to 28,081 employed Oconee residents in 2011.

While those statistics represent good news for residents, it is not a complete picture of how successful the county's economic development efforts are in bringing more jobs.

According to statistics The Journal calculated from a

SEE **JOBS**, PAGE **A5**

JOBS: Oconee is great for living, playing, investing

FROM PAGE A1

combination of state and local sources — government and private enterprise — there have been approximately 721 new jobs in the county since 2011. In the same time period there has been a loss of 1,062 jobs that are either not in the county anymore or are in the process of being based somewhere outside Oconee.

Most of the jobs lost came in 2012 as Blackwell was just coming on board in his job in Oconee County. Covidien announced it was closing its Seneca plant and moving it to Costa Rica. At the time, Covidien had 595 jobs. Those jobs are set to be completely phased out by 2015. Itron announced 300 layoffs at its West Union plant and Ryan's in Seneca, a business with 40 jobs, announced it was closing. Blackwell's office also announced 125 new jobs coming to the county that year.

Things improved a year later as net jobs reached 114, when taking into account the 224 job gains or announcements along with an announcement last summer that Taylor Made was moving its 110-job plant from Westminster to Liberty in Pickens County.

So far this year, new or expanding industry announcements have included 292 new jobs without any announcements of companies leaving or cutting back.

While Alliance Pickens executive director Ray Farley said at the time of the Taylor Made decision that the announcement would initially mean 125 new jobs for his county, Blackwell disagreed. He said the loss of the plant is not a job loss for Oconee County because many of the current Oconee County employees will make the drive to Liberty to keep their jobs when the company completes its move this summer.

"Saying that Taylor Made is job losses, you can't say that," Blackwell said. "That's like saying that Michelin in Sandy Springs shouldn't count all those employees for their job gains because people in Oconee County come there to work."

He added that the work of his office is helping to improve the overall jobs picture.

"You see an announcement like Taylor Made and Covidien, it hurts — it hurts very deeply. It pains me every single time I drive by that facility in Liberty," Blackwell said. "But I know that with our industrial parks, the momentum that we have going, there will be a brighter day in Oconee County. It is working. Our economic development strategy is paying off, people are thinking about Oconee County as a great place to live, work, play and invest."

Blackwell added that many who lost jobs with Covidien have found jobs with other companies in the county.

"It still hurts today when I talk to the leadership about them exiting in the summer of 2015, but what is good is a lot of those people, let's say 300 people, have found other employment opportunities because we're growing the economy here," he said.

"In our per capita income, again, we're creating wealth; we're 15th in the state. We increased per capita income in 2013, by $2,000."

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OCONEE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Year	New jobs	Job losses	Difference
2011	80	0	80
2012	125	952	-(827)
2013	224	110	114
2014	292	0	292
Totals	**721**	**1,062**	**-(341)**

Note: Numbers calculated from several sources including Oconee Economic Alliance and S.C. Department of Employment and Workforce as well public announcements from companies and interviews with officials.

OCONEE EMPLOYMENT RATES

Year	# of employed	Jobless rate
2011	28,081	10.1%
2012	28,762	9.1%
2013	29,036	8.2%
2014	29,647	5.1%

Source: S.C. Department of Employment and Workforce