

FEWER PEOPLE LACK JOBS

Greenville posts state's best number

By David Dykes

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Emerging employment numbers leave little doubt that Greenville County has the most dynamic economy along the Interstate 85 corridor that includes Georgia and North Carolina.

Greenville County had the state's second-lowest jobless rate at 6.7 percent last month, same as its March number, and behind only Lexington County at 6.6 percent. Marion County had the highest at 16.8 percent.

The best of the Atlanta metro counties - Gwinnett - reported 7.8 percent unemployment for March, the last month for which county numbers for all states are available.

And in North Carolina, only Orange among North Carolina's 100 counties had a better rate than Greenville's, at 6 percent for March.

But that's a tough comparison for Greenville's industrial economy, as Orange County's labor force of 72,236 includes approximately 10,000 workers that the University of North Carolina says it employs at its Chapel Hill campus.

North Carolina's industrial counties along I-85 ranged from 7.6 percent unemployment in Durham and Wake counties to 9.5 percent in Guilford, which includes Greensboro and High Point. Mecklenburg, the heart of the Charlotte metro area, wasn't much better at 9.4 percent.

"Greenville is truly one of the bright spots when you look around at major metropolitan areas and see what's going right in the country," said Mark Vitner, senior economist for Wells Fargo Securities.

Georgia and North Carolina are adding more residents, meaning labor forces are grow-

ing faster, said Vitner. That makes it harder to bring down a jobless rate, he said.

The state's jobless rate fell for the ninth straight month, the Department of Employment and Workforce said Friday, and economists believe South Carolina's labor foundation not only is holding steady but also is poised to grow stronger.

DEW officials said the unemployment rate was 8.8 percent in April, down from 8.9 percent in March.

State employers added 13,500 jobs in April, with most coming in the leisure and hospitality industries. Government was the only sector with a decrease.

Economists said South Carolina's declining unemployment rate is good news and reflects a larger trend across the region and the country.

But South Carolina's drop is more noticeable because it is coming off a much higher level in prior years compared to many other states, the economists said.

They said the state has made impressive strides on expanding its manufacturing sector, particularly in the automotive sector with the BMW expansion and the roster of tire manufacturers locating and expanding here.

They also cited the boost from Boeing's jet-assembly operations in North Charleston.

"South Carolina's economy continues to gain momentum," said Vitner.

"It's really impressive when you look at how broad-based the job gains are," reaching across most industries except for construction and financial services, Vitner said.

But South Carolina's industrial success is propelling the state forward not only in Greenville and Charleston but also in smaller areas, Vitner said.

In the Upstate, local officials have taken BMW's presence "to the next level" by building a research-and-development industry, Vitner said.

In addition, as more companies rethink overseas investment in such places as China, "South Carolina is going to be right at the top of the list" for expansions, he said.

Vitner said he worries about the large amount of direct-foreign investment in the state, given Europe's financial crisis. But even if economic activity slows, "there is so much in the pipeline right now" in South Carolina that the state can weather the crisis fairly well,

Sujit CanagaRetna, senior fiscal analyst for the Southern Legislative Conference in Atlanta, said the burgeoning manufacturing sector also has led to more activity at the Port of Charleston, another important piece in the state's economic picture.

"What is key about these manufacturing jobs is that they are high-wage, high-tech jobs, exactly the kind of jobs that are critical in creating even more positive economic outcomes," CanagaRetna said.

DEW officials said the number of people employed in South Carolina in April dropped by 3,256 to 1.9 million and the number of unemployed decreased by 2,799 to 189,865. The overall labor force fell 6,055 to 2.1 million people.

In the last year, approximately 28,290 people found work, signaling ongoing improvement, state officials said. The labor force as a whole has declined slightly over the year, or 5,598, as has the level of unemployed people, falling 33,887 since April 2011.

Nationally, the unemployment rate dropped from 8.2 percent in March to 8.1 percent in April, with about 340,000 people leaving the labor force in April.

In South Carolina, leisure and hospitality employment, up 7,300, showed a substantial increase for the third consecutive month. The majority of the increase was in the food and drinking sector, state officials said.

Trade, transportation and utilities increased by 3,400, mostly in retail-trade activity,

the officials said. Professional and business-services jobs, manufacturing, and construction also showed improvements for the second consecutive month.

Education and health services increased by 1,300 jobs, mostly in health care and social assistance, while government jobs fell by 500, primarily in local governments.

Since April 2011, total non-farm employment rose by 16,100 jobs. Manufacturing, up 7,800, and trade transportation and utilities, up 5,400, experienced the greatest increases.

"The decline in the state's unemployment rate coupled with the number of jobs announcements in recent months show positive signs of growth and stability for South Carolina's economy," said Abraham J. Turner, executive director of the state's Department of Employment and Workforce.

See JOBS, Pa

UPSTATE UNEMPLOYMENT

Greenville County (unchanged) 6.7%

Anderson County (down) 8.2% April, 8.4% March

Pickens County (unchanged) 7.5%

Oconee County (down) 8.2% April, 8.3% March

Spartanburg County (unchanged) 8.6%

Greenwood County (unchanged) 9.7%

Laurens County (down) 8.5% April, 8.8% March

South Carolina (down) 8.8% April, 8.9% March

Using her state slogan, Gov. Nikki Haley said, "It's a great day in South Carolina."

"While this is great news, we're going keep working hard make our state the most competitive in the country for business development and bring more jobs for our people," Haley said in a statement.