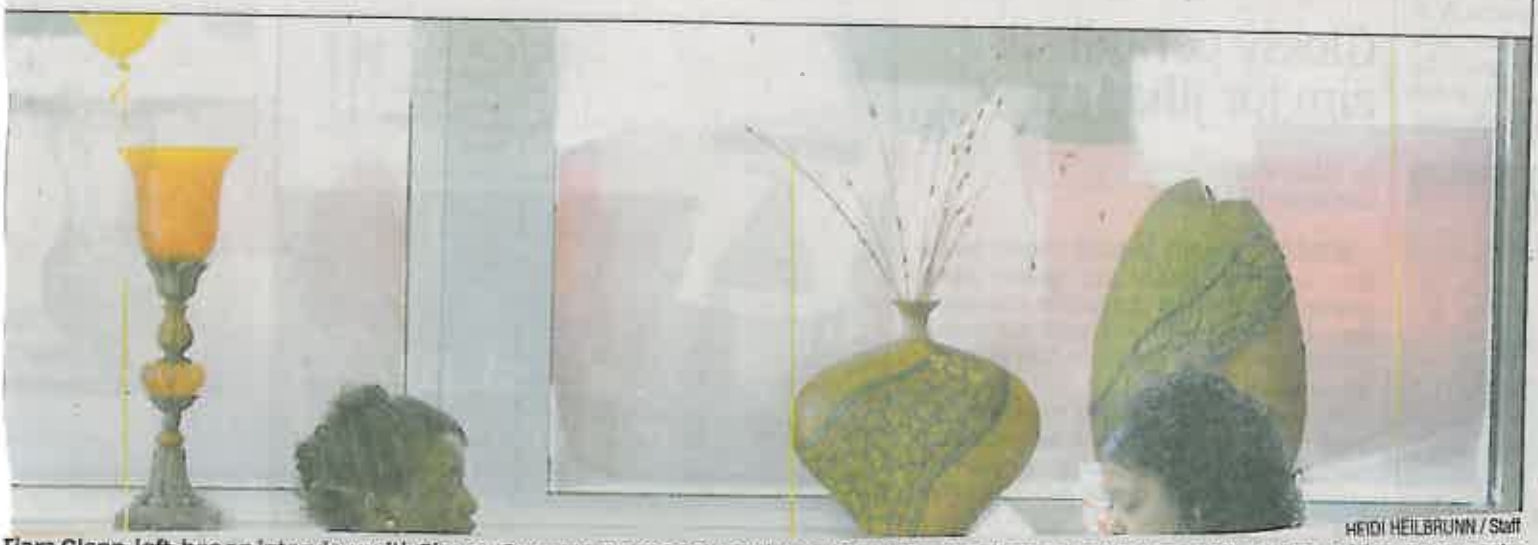
JOBLESS RATE AT 2-YEAR LOW

NEW PLANTS ANNOUNCED IN UPSTATE



HEIDI HEILBRUNN / Staff

Tiara Glenn, left, has an interview with Sharon Spearman, manager at the McDonald's on Pelham Road in Greenville. McDonald's restaurants nationwide held a hiring day Tuesday. Experts say a healthy economy needs a good mix of jobs.

Analysts say more positions open in region; some say skills scarce

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Hiring momentum from South Carolina's private sector sent the state's unemployment rate down in March to 9.9 percent, the lowest it has been in more than two years.

"This is an absolute reason to celebrate," Gov. Nikki Haley said Tuesday after the Labor Department said South Carolina was one of 34 states reporting lower jobless numbers for the month.

"We finally hit single digits in unemployment, and I will tell you that this didn't happen by accident. We have a group that is working hard every day trying to find what we can do to keep our companies healthy and what we need to be doing on workforce training."

Greenville County reported a 7.7 percent jobless rate, down from 8.1 percent, with about 900 fewer people out of work while the county added about 200 to the labor force. The numbers show that hiring is pushing the unemployment rate down.

Only Lexington County, at 7.2 percent, had a better unemployment number, while Marion County, at 18.9 percent, reported

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Upstate jobless picture improved in March

All 10 Upstate counties mirrored the state, with most experiencing significant improvements in their jobless rates.

County	March	Feb.
Union	15.6	16.5
Cherokee	12.5	13.6
Abbeville	11.6	12.4
Greenwood	10.8	11.4
State	**9.9**	**10.2**
Laurens	9.7	10.6
Oconee	9.7	10.5
Spartanburg	9.5	10.1
Anderson	9.0	9.8
Pickens	8.1	8.6
Greenville	7.7	8.1

Source: South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce

SUZIE RIDDLE / Staff

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JOBS

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the highest jobless rate statewide.

Across the nation, North Dakota had the lowest rate at 3.6 percent, while Nevada reported the worst unemployment rate at 13.2 percent.

Labor market experts and economists told GreenvilleOnline.com that they have seen more jobs coming open in the Upstate in recent weeks, even as some employers say they are having trouble finding skilled workers.

"While our overall labor force continued to shrink in March, we hope the positive news about jobs and declining unemployment will encourage more people to continue to seek reemployment," said John Finan, DEW executive director.

"We currently have over 50,000 available jobs in the state posted."

The improving employment picture comes as the state is steadily ringing up new manufacturing this year, including another plant announced Tuesday for the Upstate.

Flame Spray S.p.A., an Italian international maker of thermal spray coatings, said it is planning new production in Laurens County, where its $9.2 million investment is anticipated to bring more than 50 new jobs over next five years at Woodfield Industrial Park, just over the Greenville County line.

"Laurens County provided us with an excellent production facility and has the skilled workforce to suit our needs," said Marco Prosperini, managing director of Flame Spray and president and chief executive of Flame Spray North America Inc.

The company plans to begin production in the fourth quarter.

The Flame Spray announcement shows the state "continues to attract investment from companies from around the world," said state Commerce Secretary Bobby Hitt, adding that South Carolina is "doing the right things to compete in the global market place."

That comes on the heels of ESAB Welding & Cutting Products' announcement of a $19 million investment in a new manufacturing plant in Union County, which has the highest unemployment in the Upstate.

The plant expects to generate at least 100 jobs, with more possible in the future.

South Carolina is among 20 states that Wells Fargo Economics Group said in a new report have the potential to rapidly grow employment because of large numbers of high-growth industries.

Mark Vitner, Wells Fargo's senior economist, told GreenvilleOnline.com that while employment growth in the state is slow now, "Over the long run, South Carolina should be in great shape."

South Carolina added 15,700 jobs in March, with 10,000 of that total added by employers in the leisure and hospitality sector. The trade, transportation and utilities sector added 3,800 jobs during the month, the state Department of Employment and Workforce reported.

March hiring comes on top of several months of growth. In December, the state's employers added more jobs than any state except Texas, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In February, the state led the nation in month-to-month percentage increase in jobs, the BLS said.

But the numbers also show a changing state economy. The state's manufacturers added no net jobs in March, holding steady at 209,800 on manufacturing payrolls, up 3,600 from March 2010.

Other trends are positive, as well, including initial jobless claims in the state down and the average weekly payment of benefits falling from $21 million in 2009 to $8.7 million in April. Moreover, the duration of benefits has declined to 16.4 weeks from 17 weeks.

In March, the state's labor force totaled 2,151,600, smaller than a year ago at 2,169,600. That indicates people may be discouraged and out of the labor market, according to economists. The unemployment rate could jump if these people become convinced the economy is improving and start seeking work.

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