Manufacturing driving economic recovery

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South Carolina experienced its largest drop in unemployment numbers since 1976 last month and, in Oconee County, credit is being given to the largest employers — industrial manufacturers.

Renee Alexander, manager of Seneca Works Center, said her 14-member staff services about 3,000 people a month, finding them jobs with manufacturers, retail owners, health care agencies and individual business owners. From that group, she said manufacturers provide the most jobs.

"The industrial community in Oconee County is strong today," said Russell Johnson, project and marketing manager of the Oconee County Economic Development Commission. "From the biggest to the smallest employers, they found ways to survive the downturn and come out poised to compete in today's economy."

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Seneca's BorgWarner Automotive is one of Oconee County's top six employers. Seneca Works Center credits manufacturing with the county's decrease in unemployment figures as industry employers tend to hire the most employees in the county.

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RECOVERY: 'If there is a way to think outside of the box, we do'

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EDC data collected in January identifies the top six manufacturers in Oconee as: Itron Inc., 715 employees; Schneider Electric, 655; Koyo Bearings USA (formerly Timken), 460; BorgWarner Automotive, 450; Covidien, 423; and BASF Catalysts, 407.

In 2011, Johnson said Altera Polymers announced a $4-million investment and 50 new jobs; Collins Craft announced a $1.75-million investment with five new jobs; and BASF brought a $60-million investment and 25 new jobs. Creation of those jobs will be spread over several years, according to industry filings.

"Manufacturing is alive and well in Oconee County and the state of South Carolina," Johnson said.

Oconee's 50 manufacturers, according to Alexander, look for individuals with different educational backgrounds for various positions.

"We try to work with the manufacturer to understand the skill set (needed)," she said. "Some want people who have worked in previous manufacturing and others without. It depends on how the detail of the job is.

"In the center, we work with employers and staffing agencies to get people work," Alexander said. "With about 3,000 people a month, we have been trying to turn it up a volume or two by making better referrals and appropriate referrals."

The center's new tactics appear to be working as Oconee's unemployment rate dropped from 9.5 percent in October to 8.9 percent in November. The county's labor force stayed consistent from 30,673 in October and 30,628 in November.

"If there is a way to think outside of the box, we do," Alexander said. "We are going to do our part to get them those referrals."

Alexander said the largest groups Seneca Works services are ages 22 through 32 (25 percent) and ages 33 through 44 (22 percent).

One major factor she said her staff encourages is for clients to be open to driving outside of Oconee County for work, which is another factor in the county's decreasing unemployment rate.

"They have to be diversified," Alexander said. "We wish we could keep all in Oconee County, but if they can drive the extra 10 to 15 miles, the more likely they can get work."

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