# SC jobless rate drops to 9.5%

BY JIM DAVENPORT
ASSOCIATED PRESS

COLUMBIA — South Carolina's jobless rate plunged to its lowest rate in three years in December as an improving economy had employers putting more people to work making, moving and selling goods.

The 9.5 percent unemployment rate in December was down from 9.9 percent in November and marked the fourth straight month of declines in a state that's suffered among the highest unemployment rates in the country for years.

The lower rate remains well above the national rate of 8.5 percent in December.

But South Carolina has not seen an unemployment rate this low since it was at 9.2 percent in the midst of the Great Recession in December 2008.

And the news isn't great everywhere: Only six of the state's 46 counties reported lower unemployment rates. And Marion County had the state's highest jobless rate, 17.9 percent, up from 17.4 percent. Lexington County's rate of 7 percent was the state's lowest and up from 6.9 percent in December.

There were 3,800 fewer people working nonfarm jobs in December, but that overall category gained 17,800 jobs in the past year.

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The biggest monthly gains came with 1,200 jobs in manufacturing and 1,500 in trade, transportation and utilities — all key to making and moving goods. Manufacturers, led by companies making products that last longer, have added 11,600 people to their payrolls in the past year and while trade, transportation and utilities are up 6,000 with retailers leading gains there.

The largest loss came with seasonal employment declines of 3,500 in leisure and tourism, while government payrolls lost 2,800.

When South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley took office a year ago, the rate was 10.9 percent and peaked at 11.1 percent in August. It's been a top political and image issue during her freshman year, with staff members having signs posted above their desks showing the rate and a computer monitor in the lobby outside her office flashing news of job announcements.

Haley said the latest rate was welcome news. "But we still have much work to do. We won't stop until everyone in South Carolina who wants a job has a job," the Republican governor said. That includes a new training program for workers that she has in the works.