JOBLESS RATE PLUNGES

UPSTATE UPSWING

Economist says 'fairly strong report' shows plants hiring

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South Carolina's unemployment rate had its largest monthly drop since 1976 in November as employers added nearly 10,000 jobs during the month.

The state's jobless rate fell to 9.9 percent from 10.5 percent in October, still higher than the nation's 8.6 percent rate in November but continuing a positive trend. November's numbers give the state three straight months of falling unemployment.

"It's wonderful to get down to a single digit," said Bruce Yandle, dean emeritus of Clemson University's College of Business and Behavioral Science. "We are looking better and we are looking more like the bigger U.S. economy. That's an indication we are nearing the end of a transition" from labor-intensive manufacturing to more high-skilled, knowledge-based jobs.

Manufacturing employers, a major sector in the economy of South Carolina and the Upstate, added 900 jobs, giving the sector a gain of 10,800 jobs since last year. The state has added a total of 30,700 jobs over the past year.

Greenville County's jobless numbers fell 0.6 percent to 7.4 percent, second best in the state to Lexington County at 7.0 percent.

Pickens County's rate also fell 0.6 percent to 8.0 percent.

"I would say it's a fairly strong report," Yandle said.

"Through the efforts of the businesses in our state who have hired more South Carolinians, we have seen a significant decrease in the unemployment rate," said Abraham Turner, executive director of the state Department of Employment and Workforce.

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Upstate unemployment plummets in November

The Upstate's 10 counties all experienced a decline in the jobless rate in November, mirroring the state's experience.

County	Nov. %	Oct. %
Union	15.2	16.6
Cherokee	12.0	12.9
Abbeville	10.7	11.3
Greenwood	10.3	11.2
State	9.9	10.5
Spartanburg	9.2	9.9
Anderson	9.1	9.3
Laurens	8.9	9.7
Oconee	8.9	9.5
Pickens	8.0	8.6
Greenville	7.4	8.0

Source: SC Department of Employment and Workforce SUZIE RIDDLE/STAFF

One Upstate company on the move is Bosch Rexroth, which recently announced an $80 million expansion and is holding a job fair today from 10 a.m.-8 p.m. at Embassy Suites as it searches for 40 employees in positions ranging from engineers to machinists. The jobs will begin in January and are part of the 160 the company expects to hire because of the plant expansion.

In addition to job increases in manufacturing, trade/transportation/utilities added 8,800 jobs — most of that in retail trade. Also, the business services sector added 6,600 jobs.

INDEXX Inc., a printing and communications business, has been hiring over recent months for a couple of reasons, said Mike Miller, director of marketing.

"Business is increasing," he said. "We have expanded territories and services."

The company made the decision to diversify its services. Printing is holding its own or declining slightly, Miller said, but the email campaigns, website development and other communications areas it has moved into are growing. INDEXX is attempting to be pro-active — reading the market and making changes before the market does.

"It's diversifying," he said.

But construction continued to struggle last month, losing 100 jobs from October to November and a loss of 3,200 for the past 12 months. Leisure and hospitality, a seasonal sector, lost 3,300 jobs as expected.

While much of the November unemployment rate was positive, South Carolina's labor force dropped by 4,750 from October to 2,164,970 in November. That decline indicates some job seekers have become discouraged and suspended their search or decided to go back to school for additional training.

The jobless rate shift is "following the growth pattern we have seen across the state," Yandle said.

While unemployment is dropping in most areas, job growth is most pronounced in metro areas and counties adjoining them.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' latest study, the Upstate is surging, relatively speaking and when compared to the rest of the state, he said. Manufacturing and its growth over the past year is the reason for that.

The manufacturing sector "is pretty healthy," he said. According to the BLS, the Upstate saw both growth in employment and growth in the average wage. In addition, people are still moving into the Upstate and the entire state.

Laurens County, just south of Greenville, appears to be in a transition from a weak economy to one looking at better times, Yandle said. The county's jobless rate of 8.9 percent is a drop from 9.7 percent in October.

"It seems to have a stronger pulse than in the past," Yandle said.

The county is the site of the under-construction ZF Laurens facility, where advanced transmissions will be built. ZF announced an expansion of that facility, prior to completion of the initial construction. The company is investing a total of $530 million and expects to hire up to 1,200 employees over the next few years.

Still, the number of online employment ads in the state decreased by 2,100 to 45,400 ads in November, according to The Conference Board's Helped Wanted Online Index. The number, however, is still up 2,500 from a year ago. The largest job positions advertised included registered nurses, occupational therapists and truck drivers.

Yandle said the report should sound good to an unemployed person. But the question is will it make any difference in their job search and their life. Jobs are available, he said, but the skills gap continues to plague South Carolina and the nation as a whole.

Despite the large number of job seekers, many employers in the Upstate and elsewhere have reported difficulties in finding candidates with the skills they need.

Quick Jobs .... With a Future, a program of short-term training created by Greenville Technical College, could be a model for helping candidates upgrade their skills, Yandle said. He said employers have told him that in general South Carolinians who want to work are capable of being trained to meet the demands of the available jobs.

Gov. Nikki Haley has said job training will be a major focus of her administration in 2012. The state needs a well trained, highly knowledgeable labor force to be competitive with other states and nations in recruiting industry to the state.

"We want to partner with employers to help train the state's work force because we know that training is the most important component in providing businesses with a skilled and productive labor force," Turner said. "Through a partnership of this kind, I am optimistic that job growth will continue in the coming months."

But Yandle pointed out that many of the jobless are teenagers, who often are unskilled and may also be uneducated. The state and parents need to find a way to keep these young people in school until they graduate and then encourage them to get additional training.