

County unemployment hits 20-year low



FILE

Oconee Economic Alliance executive director Richard Blackwell cited BorgWarner's 2017 expansion announcement as evidence of the successes over the past year that have helped the county reach its lowest unemployment rate since 1998.

BY JASON EVANS
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SENECA — Unemployment in Oconee County is at a 20-year low, Oconee Economic Alliance executive director Richard Blackwell said Friday after an alliance board meeting.

As of April, county unemployment sat at 2.7 percent.

"We haven't been this low in 20 years," Blackwell said.

Unemployment was 2.5 percent in April 1998, he said.

During the height of the Great Recession, Blackwell said, Oconee saw unemployment climb to nearly 15 percent.

"14.6 percent in July 2009 was

the high-water mark," Blackwell said. "We dropped nearly 12 percent in unemployment."

He said the area is seeing "a lot of positives," including in construction and the retail and service fields.

"It's not just one area," Blackwell said. "I think we're experiencing a lot of economic development growth momentum. We've seen a lot of successes to bring in new industry and working with existing employers to get them to grow. We're experiencing a healthy business climate."

Since 2012, 1,591 new jobs

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UNEMPLOYMENT: 'Keep the momentum going'

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have been created, and Oconee has had more than half a billion dollars in new taxable capital investment, according to Blackwell.

"We're having a lot of economic development success that's causing our economy to experience growth," Blackwell said. "And this doesn't take into account the new jobs associated with Hartwell Village, Publix, Hobby Lobby. I don't see that slowing down any time soon."

Of the 10 counties in the Upstate, Oconee County had the third most economic development projects last year, he said.

"We were able to have a lot of successes in 2017," Blackwell said. "It was one of our best years ever."

BorgWarner was one of

those successes.

"Last year we announced the largest capital investment project in Oconee County history, besides Duke Energy," Blackwell said.

BorgWarner's investment of more than \$70 million created more than 150 new jobs.

"There are over 930 people working at BorgWarner, and they're continuing to hire," Blackwell said.

Itron is another success.

"Itron made a decision to close their Kentucky facility and move it here," Blackwell said. "That resulted in new investment in our community and new jobs. There are now

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Richard Blackwell
Oconee Economic Alliance executive director

over 650 people working at Itron in West Union."

Oconee County's labor force has grown since April 2017, according to Blackwell.

"Not every community can say that," he said.

Oconee County's labor force increased by 430 from April 2017 to April 2018, according to the South Carolina

Department of Employment and Workforce. By comparison, Anderson and Pickens counties both saw small drops in their labor force during that same period.

"We're in a good situation with unemployment going down and the number

of people participating in our labor force going up," Blackwell said. "There's a lot of communities across South Carolina that would love to experience what we're currently experiencing. We've just got to keep the momentum going."

jevans@upstatetoday.com | (864) 973-6681
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