

Economy: More jobs, fewer unemployed

Continued from 1A
Irvine said the city is not only focused on investing in infrastructure that businesses are interested in, but what might appeal to workers, such as parks and making downtown more appealing. "It used to be quality of life doesn't matter," he said. "It's the workforce, utilities and price of land that brought business. I always felt that was wrong. Good quality workers want a good quality of life."

County progress

Most of the development or potential development in Polk County is happening in the cities, but unincorporated parts of the county also have seen an uptick in projects.

Building permits have increased in number and in value of work being done, said Austin McGuigan, Polk County Community Development director.

"We are running 20 percent lower than the peak, pre-recession, but those were hyper-inflated times," McGuigan said.

The county also does electrical permits for Dallas, Independence, and Falls City. Those have increased significantly and are perhaps a better measure of development in the area.

"We talk to people at the counter all the time, and we think there's a lot of optimism," McGuigan said. "People are just generally willing to take more risk than they were before, and we are starting to see that a little bit."

Low unemployment

Official statistics back up the impressions local officials have about the economy. Will Summers, workforce analyst with the Oregon Employment Department, said the current preliminary unemployment rate for Polk County is 4.9 percent, down from 5.8 in 2015 and 6.39 in 2014.

The 4.9 percent rate measures those who are "able and available for work and who are looking for work." It doesn't include those who are underemployed (meaning they are



Anna Balbaneda of First Call Home Health Care, was one of 32 vendors at the Polk County Job Fair on March 23.

overqualified for their job), working part-time when they are looking for a full-time job or discouraged workers who have given up looking.

Summers said the 4.9 is close to the statewide rate.

"We are getting to the state of what we want to call full employment," he said. "Businesses are getting to the point of saying again, if you can fog a mirror, I need a body. I can plug you in at the bottom level of our organization."

Chad Freeman, the president of Strategic Economic Development Corporation (Sedcor), said a job fair held at Central High School last week offers more evidence of improvement. The fair had 32 businesses in attendance.

"Every one of them was hiring," Freeman said, adding a job fair held last year had similar results.

Sedcor focuses on recruiting and supporting existing traded-sector businesses in Polk, Marion, and Yamhill counties. In the last three years, Sedcor has been involved in assisting business with nearly \$150 million in



Halo Employment and Resource Specialist Lisa Howard talks with a job seeker during the Polk County Job, held at Central High School on March 23.

investment, bringing or retaining more than 2,100 jobs in the region.

Freeman said his "pending project" portfolio is \$200 million. Not all those projects will come to fruition, but it's another measure of growth in the region.

"It is significantly larger

than when I came on board three years ago," Freeman said.

Job growth

Other indicators imply the upward trend could continue.

Salem, which is the major employment center for peo-

ple in Polk County, is in the midst of the fastest job growth in 25 years, according to a report released last week from the Oregon Office of Economic Analysis. The report also stated the Salem area has the demographics to supply a healthy workforce in the future, with its

largest age groups younger than 20 years old.

Polk County actually ranks first in the state in forecasted labor force growth.

Obstacles

That isn't to say there aren't still momentum killers — a low inventory of industrial and retail spaces, a lack of qualified workers, and the shadow of the impending minimum wage increase.

Businesses have the most questions about minimum wage, and that may put a chill on job growth, especially for medium and small businesses.

"It's scary because we have worked so hard, especially the last couple of years, at getting employers to a place where they can hire somebody and be hiring staff back," Metcalfe said. "Now a lot of those are off the table or have giant question marks on them because that cost is going to be so impactful in so many ways."

Lawmakers are already proposing tweaks to the bill passed during this year's short legislative session. While revisions are hammered out, Metcalfe recommends businesses start planning now, or perhaps attend a financial management class or workshop, so they are prepared for changes.

Freeman said the three-county region Sedcor represents is down to about a 2 percent industrial facility vacancy rate.

Anything below 10 percent is considered a seller's market, he said, so he projects the next wave of investments will have to include businesses building their own facilities.

As for building a workforce, with programs like Halo (Helping Achieve Life-long Objective) and K-12 school districts and community colleges creating "career and technical education" programs, development is making strides.

"We are seeing that is happening and I think that will be a competitive advantage in the future," Freeman said.

Emily Mentzer contributed to this report.

Minimum wage increases loom as 'unknown' to business owners

Small, mid-sized, family-owned companies should plan now to accommodate higher state wages, Metcalfe says

By Jolene Guzman
The Itemizer-Observer

POLK COUNTY — If signs of economic recovery are evident in Polk County, there's one recent development that could stall momentum: The impending increases in the minimum wage.

Lawmakers passed legislation in this year's session that would gradually increase the minimum wage in Polk County to \$13.50 over six years.

"That is panicking every size business, especially our small- to mid-size businesses that are family-owned and operated," said Chelsea Metcalfe, the executive director of the Dallas Area Chamber



of Commerce. "Now they are already having to look at, OK, do I go back to just family because we aren't going to be able to maintain having all our employees here at this rate."

She said increasing minimum

wage will have a ripple effect in cost increases for businesses that is creating the uncertainty.

"It's the fear and unknowing of how that is going to affect our economy," Metcalfe said. "How do we get through this as a community — a small community — and keep people in the jobs they have?"

House District 20 Rep. Paul Evans, a supporter of the bill, said the intent of the increase was to create more financial stability for working families and change wage structures to sustain the middle class.

Work on the proposal that passed began last year, he said.

"In '15 there was a recognition that we needed to figure a way to

increase the relative purchasing power of working families," Evans said.

He added the law can be tweaked if necessary.

"Although costs will go up, it does give families an opportunity to get a little bit ahead and, the way it's staggered over time, businesses have some time to figure out what they're going to do. They have time to plan," Evans said.

Far from just being tweaked, Sen. Brian Boquist, who voted against the bill, believes the minimum wage legislation will be overturned in court.

He said creating different minimum wages based on geography, as the bill does, is a violation of

Oregon's constitution.

It also presents another problem.

"Unless the rest of the nation follows suit, it will put Oregon at a disadvantage," Boquist said.

So far, at least in Dallas, Metcalfe hasn't seen evidence of minimum wage alone stopping a business from opening.

"People are still excited about their business and following their dream," she said.

She noted that businesses should take time to plan for the impending increases, nonetheless.

"That's not something anybody wants to (do), but I think it's the one thing that everybody needs to do."

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10 CLOVERFIELD LANE (Digital) (PG13) (2:15) 9:45
MY BIG FAT GREEK WEDDING 2 (PG13) (12:30 2:50 5:10) 7:30 9:35
GOD'S NOT DEAD 2 (Digital) (PG) (1:20 4:05) 6:50 9:30

BATMAN V SUPERMAN:
DAWN OF JUSTICE (Digital) (PG13) (11:35 1:45 2:50 5:00)

BATMAN V SUPERMAN:
DAWN OF JUSTICE (Digital) (PG13) 6:10 8:15 9:20

I SAW THE LIGHT (Digital) (R) (1:10 4:00) 6:45 9:25

MIRACLES FROM HEAVEN (Digital) (PG) (11:35 2:00 4:35) 7:10 9:40

ZOOPTOPIA (Digital 2d) (PG) (11:40 2:10 4:45) 7:20 9:40

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10 CLOVERFIELD LANE (Digital) (PG13) (2:15) 9:45
MY BIG FAT GREEK WEDDING 2 (PG13) (12:30 2:50 5:10) 7:30 9:35
GOD'S NOT DEAD 2 (Digital) (PG) (1:20 4:05) 6:50 9:30

BATMAN V SUPERMAN:
DAWN OF JUSTICE (Digital) (PG13) (11:35 1:45 2:50)

BATMAN V SUPERMAN:
DAWN OF JUSTICE (Digital) (PG13) (5:00) 6:10 8:15

I SAW THE LIGHT (Digital) (R) (1:10 4:00) 6:45

MIRACLES FROM HEAVEN (Digital) (PG) (11:35 2:00 4:35) 7:10

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For more on Polk County economy, see Page 13A

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