

BUSINESS

State has job vacancies

Oregon 'underemployment' rate hits a record low — but there's a downside

By MIKE ROGOWAY
The Oregonian

SALEM — Economic health is often measured by the unemployment rate, an easy-to-understand benchmark with ready historical comparisons.

Economists and the public, though, have been increasingly aware of the limitations in the jobless rate. It leaves out those who want work but have given up their search and those working part-time gigs because they can't find full-time jobs.

So federal economists came up with the U-6 rate, often called the "underemployment" rate, which includes the conventional unemployed as well as those who have recently stopped looking for work and those stuck in part-time jobs.

The U-6 rate is higher than the conventional unemployment rate — sometimes a lot higher. And many, including the analytics firm Gallup, consider it to be the "real" unemployment rate.

During the Great Recession, when Oregon unemployment was running around 10%, the U-6 underemployment rate was roughly double that. Oregon's U-6 rate topped out at 21% in the early days of the pandemic in 2020, 8 percentage points higher than the standard measure.

The good news is that underemployment has fallen just as fast as the standard benchmark over the past two years. The U-6 rate was 7.4% in March, the lowest point on record. (Official unemployment was 3.8% — near, but not quite at, an all-time low.)

That's great news if you're looking for a job.

"If someone wants a job, they are out there, unlike during the Great Recession recovery," said Anna Johnson with the Oregon Employment Department, who wrote a new analysis of Oregon's labor market. "And those job vacancies tend to be for permanent, full-time work."

But here's the downside. Oregon has more than 100,000 job vacancies, with open jobs outnumbering the unemployed. That worker shortage is constraining economic growth, in Oregon and across the country.

Economists, and the Federal Reserve, had hoped that workers would come off the sidelines as the pandemic faded. It now seems that there's hardly anyone sitting out — certainly not enough people to resolve the labor shortage.

Josh Lehner with the Oregon Office of Economic Analysis addressed that issue in an essay earlier this month.

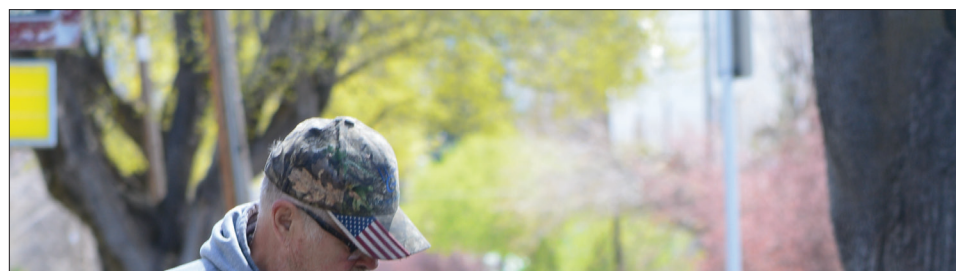
With immigration down sharply, and Oregon's workers growing older along with the general population — "mediocre demographics," Lehner calls it — the state has a dwindling labor pool.

That's a big part of the reason why jobs are so readily available right now and why paychecks are rising as employers compete for workers. But with consumer demand still rising, and production constrained by the labor shortage and other factors, inflation is rising even faster than wages.

The Federal Reserve's tighter monetary policy could help cool off demand, Lehner writes. But the labor shortage? He says it "will only change with broader societal shifts or, say, increased immigration both international and domestic."



Former chiropractor's office being converted into a lodging site



Above: A new lodging site in La Grande, unofficially named the Historic Fourth Street Studios, is under renovation on Tuesday, May 17, 2022. The owners hope to open in late July.

By DICK MASON
The Observer

LA GRANDE — A former La Grande health care building, closed since 2010, now has just what the doctor might have ordered — a new purpose.

The structure, on Fourth Street between Washington Avenue and Depot Street, is being converted into a multi-day lodging site, one designed to meet the needs of individuals such as those staying in La Grande on business, according to Jack Burgoyne, of La Grande, who purchased the former office building with his wife, Judy Burgoyne, in October 2021.

The future lodging site, now unofficially named the Historic Fourth Street Studios, will have two spaces available for people to rent. Each studio will have a kitchen, a queen-sized bed, a hide-a-bed sofa, cabinets, a traditional oven, a refrigerator and restrooms, showers and a washer and dryer. The Historic Fourth Street Studios will also have features to help people who are physically challenged.

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Dick Mason/The Observer
Jack Burgoyne in early April 2022 cleans up the sidewalk outside a building he and his wife, Judy Burgoyne, are converting into a lodging site on Fourth Street, La Grande. The Burgoynes purchased the office building in October 2021.

Familiar face turns up at county chamber

Deena McFetridge, formerly of Joseph Chamber, takes administrative assistant post

By BILL BRADSHAW
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — There's a new face at the Wallowa County Chamber of Commerce that belongs to someone quite familiar in the business community — Deena McFetridge started there Tuesday, May 3, as the new administrative assistant.

She replaces Diane Knox, who retires at the end

of the month after 12 years in the post.

But McFetridge isn't new to such work. For the past two and a half years, she's been president of the Joseph Chamber of Commerce, a volunteer position.

"It was all volunteer," she said in an interview May 13. "Now I'm getting paid to do what I love."

Chamber work seems to be McFetridge's passion. "I love helping the community out. I love representing the community, telling information about the community," she said.

In fact, she's hoping to help the county chamber grow. She says her primary responsibility in the new job is "to promote Wal-

lowa County and to get members."

She said there are about 325 members in the chamber from all over the county, although not all businesses are members.

Longtime county resident

McFetridge has lived in Wallowa County since 1985, having moved here from La Grande. She said her father moved here to work as a meatcutter at Safeway, a job he held for several decades.

"We moved here when I was in junior high," she said.

Her husband, Carl McFetridge, is a county native who works for the

county road department. They raised a son and a daughter here.

"They grew up farming" and went onto careers that reflect that background.

Their son is now a diesel mechanic in La Grande, and their daughter is the agriculture and welding teacher at Burns High School.

Deena and Carl also have strong ties to the county's ag community.

"We're the beef superintendents at the Wallowa County Fair and we're highly involved in the Enterprise FFA alumni," she said.

McFetridge said she also has personal experience working with businesses. She worked for the

Sports Corral in Joseph for 13 years and nearby Mad Mary's for 12 years.

But she's hoping her new job will be her last.

"I'm hoping this is my last job, ever, in my life," she said.

Plenty of support

Both the county chamber and the Joseph Chamber expressed enthusiasm for McFetridge in her new job.

Jude Graham, with whom McFetridge worked closely at the Joseph Chamber, said she has high hopes for the new situation.

"I think she'll enjoy that and do well," Graham said.

She said the board of the Joseph Chamber has yet to designate a new chamber

president, so as vice president, Graham is serving as interim president.

Jennifer Piper, executive director of the county chamber, was excited to have McFetridge in the post.

"She has some wonderful, very relevant experience," Piper said. "Obviously, I like her a lot or I wouldn't have hired her. We're excited to have Deena and her experience in the county, the volunteer work that she's done, the professional work she's done. Her work with the Joseph Chamber is a really good tie-in to what this role is going to be."

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