

December 8-14, 2003

Jobs are more plentiful

Orlando-area employers are expanding payrolls.

By **BARRY FLYNN**
 SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

For a very long time, it seemed that Orlando was, more than anything else, in the business of manufacturing jobs.

The driving force usually was provided by the area's theme parks and the hordes of tourists they attract. But a construction industry fueled by the housing needs of a steady stream of new arrivals, a nascent high-technology sector, and a wide range of other players made their contributions.

The result was always more work for a burgeoning Central Florida population.

Then came the terrorist attacks of September 2001 — a staggering blow to everything from airlines to hotels, restaurants, rental-car companies and T-shirt shops. After the attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., jobs in the Orlando area steadily dribbled away for 13 successive months. The area's employment base shrank first through the rest of the recession

that had begun in March 2001, then through the long "job-less recovery" that followed.

Now, it seems as though the old Orlando job-making machine is back in gear, if not roaring.

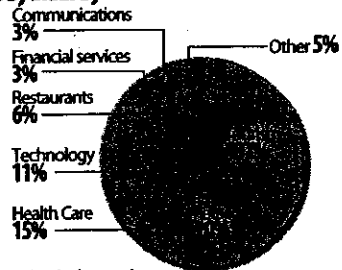
"It ain't like it used to be, but it's better than it was," was economist Bob Allsbrook's jocular way of expressing his good news-bad news take on the local jobs picture. Allsbrook, chief economist for Birmingham, Ala.-based AmSouth Corp., warned that, while travel to Orlando has risen sharply, there are still signs that hotels, airlines and travel agencies have had to discount deeply, and thereby cut into

EMPLOYMENT

Yearly totals



Jobs by industry in 2003



SOURCE: Sentinel research

DANA FASANO/ORLANDO SENTINEL

their profits, to attract the increased traffic.

Even so, the area's job market has clearly pulled out of its nosedive and is on the way up, especially among the region's largest employers.

After a turnaround that began late last year, metropolitan Orlando — Orange, Seminole, Osceola and Lake counties — has been generating new jobs throughout this year,

according to the Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation, the government unit that tracks employment.

PLEASE SEE **JOBS, 16**

Most new jobs are in lower-paying service sector

Better still, this past spring the area's monthly job totals finally started surpassing the previous peaks achieved in the same months two years earlier, before the terrorist attacks.

The region's job growth still doesn't match the glory days of 2000. Central Florida had a net increase of 29,700 jobs — a growth rate of 3.3 percent — in the 12 months that ended October 2000. This year the pace was about half that, with 14,700 net new jobs in October compared with a year earlier — an increase of 1.6 percent.

"We're still a long way from where we were when times were good," Kathie Hughes, an economist with the Agency for Workforce Innovation, said of the statewide numbers, which show a similar lag.

Among the region's 100 biggest employers, surveyed in recent weeks by the *Orlando Sentinel*, 53 reported increases in their employment levels compared with last year, while 36 showed declines and five said their head counts were stable. (The remaining six companies weren't on last year's list.) For all 100 companies, there was a net gain of about 16,500 full- and part-time jobs, an increase of more than 5 percent from a year ago.

But Orlando's marquee employers — the two biggest theme-park resorts — said their employment levels were the same as last year's, or virtually so.

By far the leading employer in Orlando — as usual — is Walt Disney Co., whose Walt Disney World theme parks and resorts are thought to be the biggest single-site employer in the United States. But the head count at Disney World and other Disney operations here has stagnated during the past year.

The company employed 51,600 people in Central Florida as of Sept. 30, the end of the company's fiscal year, Disney spokesman Bill Warren said. That compares with 51,400 on Sept. 30, 2002, Warren said.

"In our world, a few hundred [more jobs] is almost a wash," he said.

After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks suffocated travel to Orlando, Disney imposed a hiring freeze, cut many employees' hours and cut staff. Even before the attacks, Disney had announced plans for staff cuts.

Now, the employees who remain are back to normal work levels, Warren said. "The work force we have today is getting the hours they need."

Disney's work force represents 15 percent of the 342,000 workers on this year's CFB Top Employers list. About 4 percent of all workers in Central Florida are on Disney's payroll.

Vivendi Universal S.A., owner of Universal Orlando, the No. 2 resort, said its employment was exactly the same as last year — and the year before that — 12,000. There is no way to independently confirm companies' reported totals.

Only Anheuser-Busch Cos.' SeaWorld Orlando, the smallest of the three major theme-park operators, reported a larger work force. Spokeswoman Becca Bides said the increase of 355 employees, to 3,640, was due to the opening this year of a 5-acre "seaside village" shopping-and-entertainment area.

Despite the microscopic growth at the big theme parks, tourism employment overall has led the way in the Orlando job market's resurgence — continuing a trend that has long worried economist David Scott, a professor of finance at the University of Central Florida. Scott sees the area's dependence on generally lower-wage

tourism jobs as a significant flaw.

"There are still severe reasons for concern about the local jobs mix, because the single-biggest gainer over the last year has been in leisure and travel," or tourism, he said.

While metro Orlando overall lost 4,100 manufacturing jobs during the year that ended in October, it gained 6,800 generally lower-paying tourism jobs in the same period, according to the Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation.

As a pointed example of the manufacturing decline, one long-time entry on the Top Employers list, Recoton Corp., has virtually evaporated during the past year or so. Recoton, which just two years ago had about 1,000 employees at its Lake Mary headquarters, is in bankruptcy with only 10 members of a "liquidation team" there closing things out, a spokesman said.

Another company that disappeared in bankruptcy, Budget Group Inc., sold its rental-car business to Cendant Corp., owner of Avis Rent-a-Car. Employees of both operations are now included in Cendant's numbers.

Running counter to the manufacturing trend, however, is Harris Corp. of Melbourne. The Brevard County tech company added 700 jobs there, where the overwhelming majority of employees work in its government-communications unit.

The company makes communications equipment for fighter aircraft, satellites and "classified programs" for national security agencies, spokesman Tom Hausman said.

"That business has had outstanding growth over the past three years," he said.

Likewise, Siemens AG, the big German conglomerate, add-

ed more than 600 employees here last year. The company's Siemens Westinghouse Power Systems unit in Orlando builds the huge electricity generators that the company says account for as much as a third of the United States' electricity.

Another job category that was down during the past year was finance and insurance, which gave up 200 jobs in the Orlando market in the year that ended in October, according to state figures.

All three of the biggest banks operating in the market — SunTrust Banks Inc., Bank of America Corp. and Wachovia Corp. — had declines in their local work forces.

The biggest, SunTrust, laid off employees at a local telephone call center and some computer workers.

Despite the mixed performance of various job-producing categories in the Orlando market, most economists generally welcome the overall upturn.

"We've still got some challenges," said UCF's Scott. But he added: "All in all, I'd much rather be generating 15,000 jobs a year than losing them."
