

Orlando's jobless rate falls to level of pre-9-11

By Greg Groeller
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Unemployment in the Orlando area fell last month to its lowest rate since before the September 2001 terrorist attacks, aided by gains in hospitality, service-sector and construction jobs.

The jobless rate in metropolitan Orlando — which comprises Orange, Osceola, Seminole and Lake counties — dropped to a preliminary 4.2 percent in December, compared with 4.8 percent a month earlier and 4.7 percent in December 2002, the Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation reported Friday.

The last time the metro area's unemployment rate was that low was August 2001, the month before the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., killed thousands of people and sent the nation's travel and tourism sectors into economic tailspins.

Orlando's employment growth also accelerated in December, with 6,000 more jobs than in November and 23,000 more than a year ago.

It was the metro area's fourth consecutive month of year-over-year job growth. In terms of the number of jobs added, it was by far the biggest gain among the state's metro areas — Sarasota-Bradenton was second with 15,800 jobs. In terms of growth rate, Orlando's 2.5 percent increase trailed only Sarasota-Bradenton (5.7 percent) and West Palm Beach (2.7 percent).

“Generally, this is an outstanding labor-market report for Orlando,” said David Scott, a University of Central Florida economist and finance professor, whose enthusiasm was tempered by evidence that many of the jobs have been added by industries that

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historically pay below-average wages.

The leisure-and-hospitality sector, for example, has added 8,000 jobs during the past year, while professional/business services have added 5,100, and construction employment has grown by 4,100.

Area manufacturers, meanwhile, have shed 2,400 jobs since December 2002.

“Orlando's mediocrity with regard to average pay continues to worsen,” Scott said.

Central Florida's job market is recovering much more quickly than the nation as a whole. Two weeks ago, the federal government reported that U.S. employment was essentially unchanged in December — there was a net gain of only 1,000 jobs nationwide — while the country's unemployment rate fell to 5.7 percent from 5.9 percent in November.

The statewide jobless rate, which like the national data is adjusted to remove seasonal factors (the local figures are not), dropped to 4.7 percent in December, down from 4.9 percent in November and 5.3 percent a year ago.

Metro Orlando's unemployment rate, while more than a full percentage point below the U.S. jobless rate of 5.7 percent in December, was about average for the 20 Florida metro areas tracked by the government. But it was among the lowest of the state's six large metro areas — second only to Tampa-St. Petersburg's 3.7 percent preliminary rate.

Nicole Ovalles, an Orlando resident who has been job hunting for several weeks, said she has been disappointed with the area's low wages.

Ovalles, who spent the past two years as a stay-at-home mom, is looking for work as an administrative assistant or as a customer-service representative. “Unless you have a master's [degree], I don't think the pay is good at all here,” she said.

Scott, the UCF economist, said Central Florida should follow the example of other Southern regions by bidding aggressively for large factories planned by automakers and other such industries.

“We need to do more than manufacture T-shirts here,” he said.