

Universal raises its base pay to \$7.25

The Orlando theme park also increases benefits as the quest for workers heats up.

By Scott Powers

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Universal Orlando upped the ante Tuesday in the local battle for theme-park workers, pushing its minimum wage past those at SeaWorld and Walt Disney World, then throwing in benefits and bonuses.

The 50-cent raise will increase Universal's minimum to \$7.25 an hour starting May 7. The hike comes just as the theme parks and other area attractions begin their big summer-season recruitment in the tightest labor market anyone has seen in many years.

Last month, SeaWorld raised its minimum to \$7 an hour, and Disney went to \$6.90 last fall.

In the next three weeks, all three will be trying to hire thousands of full-time and part-time workers for the summer. And they have to find those workers even though greater Orlando's unemployment rate is 2.8 percent — which economists say means that everyone who wants a job already has one.

Seeking an edge, Universal also is promising benefits packages — which include medical, dental and life insur-

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ance and a 401(k) savings plan — to all its workers immediately, rather than requiring a three-month waiting period.

It is also offering an additional 25 cents an hour to most new workers who come in with two years of experience in tourism or hospitality.

“Recruiting and keeping the best people we can find — and giving them a positive, fun work environment — directly impacts our ability to offer guests the incredible experience they expect from Universal Orlando,” President Bob Gault said in a written statement. All three parks are offering incentives and argue that their overall wage-and-benefits package is best.

Disney, for example, is giving cash bonuses of hundreds of dollars to new housekeepers, lifeguards and others. SeaWorld, which already offers benefits immediately to new hires, began a new advancement program last month that allows good new workers to get promoted quickly.

“We were the first out of the gate, in March,” with a wage increase, SeaWorld spokeswoman Becca Bides said.

Still, nobody is going to get rich off the latest increases in theme-park wages. Bruce Nissen, director of research at the Center for Labor Research and Studies at Florida International University in Miami, said wages in the \$7.25 range still amounts to poverty for full-time workers trying to make a

living.

His organization estimates that single people living in Orange, Osceola, Lake and Seminole counties need to earn about \$8.50 an hour to be barely self-sufficient.

In a two-income family with two kids, each adult would have to make more than \$10 an hour to barely make ends meet, he said.

He said the wage increases seem to be coming six to eight months later than he would have expected, considering the economic growth.

“The unemployment level is so low, it's basically what's considered zero, because there always are people moving from job to job,” Nissen said.

“So workers will move around to jobs, and drop a job

at the drop of a hat to get a little better wages and benefits. And the wages will rise. And I think we're finally seeing that happen here,” he said.

Wages are not such a big issue with hourly workers, anyway, said Ady Milman, a business professor at the Rosen College of Hospitality Management at the University of Central Florida.

His research found that employees were far more interested in having friendly co-workers, nice managers, clear responsibilities and consistent work hours.

Work-environment factors were “really the major, major concern for hourly workers,” he said.

The higher theme-park pay does not mean Orlando is go-

ing to see wages go up everywhere.

David F. Scott, professor of finance at UCF's College of Business Administration, said the wage increases will “make people down there happier” but are unlikely to affect wages in other trades, such as hospitals, distributors or law firms.

It is also unclear if the wage war can be sustained, consid-

Battle for park workers heats up wage war in Orlando

ering the attendance struggles Universal experienced last year, the soft attendance at SeaWorld and the region's decreasing hotel-occupancy rates.

Universal's pay increase amounts to about 7 percent for the thousands of minimum-wage jobs there. Universal, like the other parks, either will have to get more efficient or consider another increase in its ticket price, which, Scott said, "is probably a dangerous thing to do."

Universal's pay hike doesn't surprise others in the business. Steve Baker, president of the Baker Leisure Group consulting firm, which is helping develop the new Ron Jon Surf Park near International Drive, said smaller attractions like that may have to go even higher.

"We're finding we have to be in the \$9- to \$10-an-hour range to attract the right people," Baker said. "It's just how tight the market is. We assume it will remain that way."
