

Job vacancies up, but the pay isn't

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MANKATO — Job vacancies and total jobs are up.

Unemployment is down.

All in all, the employment situation is improving in the Mankato area, a welcome trend after a long period of stagnation.

Overall, there were 1,624 job vacancies across all sectors in the fourth quarter of 2010 in the nine counties that make up the Mankato region. That's up from 1,234 the previous year. Big gains were seen in health care support — such as nurse's aides and home health care workers.

Manufacturing jobs were also up, as were retail and transportation-related jobs.

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Unemployment rate dips below 9 percent.

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JOBS: Skills are an obstacle

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"Any time you have an increase in job vacancies, it's a good thing," said Brent Pearson, a regional analyst who works out of the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development's Mankato office, "because it means there's a job out there for someone."

Bolstering DEED's job vacancy survey is the latest unemployment rate news from the U.S. Department of Labor, which reported Friday and overall unemployment rate just under 9 percent. Mankato's rate is 5.4 percent.

And, in addition to the increase in job vacancies, there also appears to be growth in the number of actual jobs. Pearson said the Mankato/North Mankato Metropolitan Statistical Area added jobs at a faster rate than other MSAs in Minnesota.

But not all the news is glowing. Many of the jobs in the job vacancy report are part-time or seasonal.

And many aren't high-paying career jobs. A significant portion are retail jobs, which Pearson says are important — especially in a town that is a regional hub and reliant upon the retail community — but don't exactly pay a mortgage or feed a family.

Still, they are jobs. And that, along with other indicators, has one local economy watcher thinking things are getting better for the Region 9 area, especially Mankato and North Mankato.

"We are really pleased with the trendline in what employment is looking like," said Jonathan Zierdt of Greater Mankato Growth.

Zierdt says he hasn't pored over the job vacancy numbers yet, but he says they've seen enough from other jobs-related statistics, and heard enough from job providers, to say there's "lots of opportunity for people to find jobs," he said.

He said he's spoken with CEOs around state who are growing frustrated because, as the recession lifts and they begin adding jobs, they're having a hard time finding skilled workers to fill them "I ask them, 'What's holding you back from expanding?' More and more they're saying, 'It's not that the people aren't here, it's that the skill set isn't there.'" Things are happening, however, to change that.

Minnesota State University, South Central College and Rasmussen College have all been proactive in communicating with industries and re-tailoring curriculum.

They've been actively trying to graduate students who have the skills industry is demanding. Zierdt says even Gustavus Adolphus College and Bethany Lutheran College — traditionally liberal arts schools — have done the same.

"We're rich in higher education activities and retraining," he said. "What I'm worried about is how do we make sure that recovery doesn't stall out because businesses don't think they have the talent to fill those vacancies."