

County jobless rate remains unchanged at 11.4%

While July's figure was same as June, it's much better than a year ago

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Mail Tribune

August 23, 2011 2:00 AM

Jackson County's 11.4 percent unemployment rate reported Monday by the Oregon Employment Department wasn't what people looking for work wanted to see.

Even though the jobless rate remained unchanged from June, it was decidedly better than the 12.8 figure a year earlier. In Josephine County, the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate was 12.4 percent.

"We're plateaued at a high unemployment level," said Guy Tauer, a regional economist with the Employment Department. "It's a historically high level of unemployment for Jackson County and we're certainly in the grips of a slow economy. Whether we're still in a recession or going back into recession remains to be seen, but the numbers are still elevated. We are down from the peak during the actual recession."

Last month, Jackson County payroll employment declined by 980 jobs as teachers and classified employees were off the employment books. That doesn't significantly affect the unemployment rate.

Tauer said teachers going back to work in the fall are simply removed from the labor force totals during the summer unless they are seeking employment. If teachers take summer jobs in other sectors, they become part of another industry's count. "We don't track what they do," he said.

Over a 12-month period, total payroll jobs rose by 2,010, a 2.8 percent increase.

Retail trade added an estimated 480 positions last month, moving to 600 jobs above the July 2010 level.

"Growth in retail came in stronger than I would have expected," Tauer said.

Manufacturing had a monthly gain of 310, while construction picked up 160 employees, while both business and professional services, and leisure and hospitality grew by 150 positions.

"While permit levels are pretty depressed, nationally remodeling has been pretty strong. Paint gets old, roofs wear out and sidewalks crack, so maintenance keeps construction from being worse than it otherwise would be," Tauer said.

Tauer said tourism has been strong, boosting the leisure and hospitality numbers.

Health care tacked on 110 jobs, while financial activities, wholesale trade, information, along with resource-oriented mining and logging had nominal gains.

Tauer said the bits of growth seen across a wide swath of industry sectors should be taken as a good sign, though.

There are good signs in the mix of numbers, said Alec Miller, senior economist at REMI-Northwest in Medford.

Freight movement has picked up in the past 12 months.

"The amount of freight we're shipping is way up over last year," Miller said. "That's very much an indicator of what businesses are planning to do, just as much as the negative housing numbers. It's the housing glut that's really frustrating growth and affecting the mills. We aren't going to see improvement in housing construction for years, we'll have to wait it out."

Because tourism is such an integral part of the local economy and jobs picture, transportation costs play a significant role.

"Resolving things in Libya will help with oil prices," Miller said. "What we want is stable prices; it's the nasty price spikes that cause problems."

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