

Local employment experts see bright future for North Country

By MICHELLE BESAW
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PLATTSBURGH — At the end of December, the national unemployment rate rose to 7.2 percent — the highest since 1993.

Bureau of Labor Statistics show that's a loss of 2.6 million U.S. jobs in 2008 — 1.9 million people lost their jobs in the last four months alone.

And here in the North Country, companies like Wyeth and Georgia Pacific have decided to lay off a number of employees.

But despite the economic turmoil, local employment experts look toward a bright future for the area.

But exactly what is the job market like here in the North Country?

"Like everywhere else, the current job market is rough," said Paul Grasso, the executive director at Work Force Investment Board.

The reason?

"The economy is downsizing," he said, adding that companies are cautious about hiring.

Yet, while the job market may appear tight, Grasso says the North Country is well-positioned for the future, especially with the coming of Nova Bus.

"Right now, it's the employer of choice."

He said the area is industrially friendly with projects like the wind turbines and Bombardier.

Nova Bus, a Quebec-based company that designs, produces and manufactures urban transit buses, will begin hiring employees this month. Grasso said this could employ laid-off workers from places like Georgia Pacific and Wyeth, giving the bus company a "skilled workforce."

Grasso is optimistic about the coming of jobs, especially since Nova Bus requires that all suppliers be within a 15-minute traveling distance, bringing to the area jobs in engine building and wire harnesses.

He attributes current and coming success to the hard work and insight of Empire State Development Corporation President Adore Kurtz, Roseanne Murphy at the Plattsburgh office of the Empire State Development Corporation and Plattsburgh North Country Chamber of Commerce President Garry Douglas.

Douglas, Grasso said, really identified "not what's right for today, but what's right for tomorrow."

His optimism is shared by David Coryer, the director of sales and recruiting at ETS, Inc., a staffing, consulting and training company in Plattsburgh.

"We're uniquely positioned here," he said. "We're not immune to the problems in America, but we're not as sick."

He admits that there has been an increase in people needing ETS's services, but says their "clients are healthy companies that are still hiring."

And like Grasso, Coryer thinks Nova Bus will create an onslaught of jobs in the new year, adding that the Plattsburgh Transportation and Aeronautical Institute is a great opportunity for young people to learn a trade, as long as they're willing to roll up their sleeves.

"The community really has to take seriously and embrace what is the Plattsburgh Aeronautical Institute.

"These are decent jobs that pay well."

And as for hiring freezes, Coryer said, companies are holding out to see what happens with President Barack Obama's infrastructure plans, which propose the biggest public works spending since the 1950s. But until then, Coryer said, companies have to be conservative.

"We're in uncharted territory."

But while auto industries and retail businesses seem to take a dive nationwide, Coryer said, a good salesperson is the last to be dismissed in a bad economy because they're bringing in revenue.

"The demand (for automobiles) isn't going to dry up. You're not going to see people driving around in jalopies."

And while he can't put a date on it, Coryer remains positive this recession is nearing the end.

"Once you recognize you're in a recession, you're close to the bottom and you'll be coming out."

Gary Wagoner, the regional manager of Westaff here, said obviously unemployment numbers speak for themselves, but like Grasso and Coryer, he says "we're not in terrible shape (here)."

"I'm optimistic about the region."

Wagoner said he's seen an increase in people coming to Westaff — many willing to take jobs under their skill level, something that he said may be necessary to finding a job.

But nonetheless, "there's work out there," he said.

"More than likely, we're going to really see a need of technical people."

Which will help staff companies like Nova Bus.

"I credit the area for really staying the course on the Plattsburgh Aeronautical Institute," he said.

But while he praises the institute, economic development and the Workforce Investment Board, Wagoner maintains that no job is really safe anymore.

"All jobs are temporary. I don't think there's any classification of a job that's safe anymore. That's why we have training programs."

And like Grasso and Coryer, Wagoner thinks companies in hiring freezes are waiting it out through January, February and into March to get a better understanding of the economy. But, he adds, there may be an increase in temp jobs, which could be promising, saying "once they get going, temp jobs often turn full time."

Going forward, Wagoner is enthusiastic about the ripple effect of Nova Bus and its creation of jobs in the North Country, adding that there are jobs out there.

"We're in a good position," he said. "If you do a little digging, you'll find it."

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