

Public Forum

Unemployment Data Doesn't Tell The Real Economic Story In Clackamas County



By Karen Bowerman, Lake Oswego City Councilor, Candidate, Clackamas County Commissioner, Position 2

Let's start with the bottom line. In Clackamas County we are too slow in recovering jobs lost during the recession. We do not have enough family wage jobs. We look to our County Commissioners for leadership in solving under-employment problems because they are of critical importance to our residents but have not been addressed effectively.

Now let's unravel the story -- first the problem, and then solutions that are begging for implementation.

The problem that festers

We all know the face of unemployment -- maybe you, maybe family members or neighbors. Naturally it feels good to hear that unemployment is down. In Clackamas County it has gone down to 6%. That is good news, but don't burst into cheers yet.

One might assume that when unemployment goes down, numbers of people working (called "labor force

participation rate") goes up. But not necessarily so. Oregon's labor force participation rate is only 61%, a record low since data were collected in the 1970s. This means that only 3 out of 5 of working-age people are working, or are unemployed and looking for a job.

In 2010 in Clackamas County, 201,000 people were working but by 2013 there were only 196,000 and those numbers are expected to decrease for an important group needing jobs -- persons 24 and younger (*Source: State of Oregon Employment Dept, February 27, 2014*). Sadly, these numbers tell the real economic story and the real personal story because when labor force participation is so low, it means people aren't working. Jobs mean family security, quality of life and personal pride.

To make matters worse, job growth remains too low in Clackamas County. Whereas both Multnomah and Washington counties have already added back all of the jobs they lost in the recession, Clackamas County trails them both, having added back only 44% of the jobs we lost since the recession began. Many talk about the problem; solutions are what's needed. Walt Disney said "The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing."

Solutions begging for implementation

First, we need positive policies that grow profitable companies that in turn grow private jobs. County Commissioners must reach out to our top employers, personally knowing the individuals who lead those businesses. Knowing them well, the County will be more knowledgeable about how to keep them here and support their growth. Commissioners also need to ask and answer: Why would a business want to come to Clackamas County? What clusters are the best fit with our region? When we articulate the answers, that's the basis on which we recruit new business to come to the County. When new businesses locate here, more jobs for our residents result.

Second, we need efficient, fair permitting. When business hears that permitting is slow in our county or that we are the county of "no," there is incentive to expand elsewhere. Efficiency of permitting is usually achieved with clear expectations and accountability for good work flow practices.

Third, we need to develop a common voice so that County Commissioners and business organizations understand priorities from each other's perspectives. To reach that point, there is the need for meaningful relationships and responsiveness to the other's point of view. For example, until government

Go & People to See

Unemployment Data ... continued from pg. 5

realizes why wasted time in providing commercial land kills businesses' excitement for coming to Clackamas County, we continue to lag behind in job recovery. Understanding and good policy bring certainty, but without certainty on basics such as land availability and fees, businesses go elsewhere and take job opportunities elsewhere.

These kinds of solutions are critical, but they have not been implemented effectively. They should be led by committed and persistent elected officials with the mindset that it can be done "because it matters."

- "Have a Say in What You Pay"
- Fund core services first – public safety, roads
- Healthy business environment for job growth



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