

Companies curious about workforce as unemployment falls

By Kent Mallet
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JOHNSTOWN – Declining unemployment in Licking County, a positive development, can have a negative flip side, local officials say.

Grow Licking County community improvement corporation members discussed the needs of employers and workers at Monday's meeting at Tech International.

As unemployment falls, the challenge shifts from finding jobs for the jobless to finding employees for employers.

"There are a number of companies in Heath and in Licking County that have job openings and simply cannot find people with the skills to fill them," Heath Mayor Mark Johns said.

"Companies will look at this unemployment rate and ask, 'Do you have any bodies that can work?' "

The Licking County unemployment rate was 4 percent in December, the lowest since October 2001.

In an effort to provide funds for education and training programs to help fill job openings, the CIC board approved the creation of the Grow Licking County Workforce Development Fund, in conjunction with the Licking County Foundation.

The funds will be used, as needed, to help train residents at the Career and Technology Education Centers of Licking County or Central Ohio Technical College.

The new development fund will assist individuals who have the motivation and talent to broaden their skills in the labor market, Johns said.

In addition to the 3,400 counted as unemployed, there are others that a new employer could attract, said John Fisher, director of the Licking County Department of Job and Family Services.

"The stats will show individuals who are actually underemployed," Fisher said. "They're available for greater, advanced opportunity and higher skill levels."

Harrison Township Trustee Mark Van Buren, a visitor to the meeting, said employers should do more to attract workers. Some of the new jobs coming to the county are not high-paying positions, he said.

"I'm associated with people making \$10 an hour, and they can't make it," Van Buren said. "It'd be interesting to find out what all those (new) jobs are really paying. If people can't live off what they're paying, that's a problem."

Dan Evers, director of Grow Licking County, said the county is in the process of trying to replace an employer leaving the area.

Trulite Glass and Aluminum Solutions, formerly AGC Flat Glass, in Hebron, will close in the spring, putting 70 employees out of work.

"We're in discussion with Columbus 2020 about presenting that facility to two prospects," Evers said. "We feel pretty good about getting someone in there in relatively short order."

Grow Licking County has 78 potential outside investment opportunities and working with several area firms on consolidation and expansion opportunities in Johnstown, Hebron, Utica, Heath, Newark, Pataskala and Union Township.

Evers said his message to employers is: "We have low unemployment, but we still have your labor force."