Written by MARK JAEGER
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Development director says local unemployment numbers on the rebound

The numbers Ozaukee Economic Development Executive Director Kathleen Cady Schilling used in her portion of the State of the County address were surprisingly optimistic, considering the often bleak condition of the nation's economy.

Schilling provided an assessment of the county's economic well-being as well as an update on work the development agency has completed in recent years.

More county-related updates were provided by County Administrator Tom Meaux, County Board Chairman Rob Brooks and each of the chairmen of the County Board's committees.

The address was delivered Wednesday, Aug. 31, in the board chambers of the Ozaukee County Administration Center in Port Washington.

Despite the chilling economy, Schilling reported the OED has been working behind the scenes to attract businesses and retain existing jobs.

Since 2007, she said, the agency has assisted with 26 business projects, creating 503 new jobs and retaining 805.

According to the OED, those new jobs added more than $42 million to the local economy and the retained jobs had an impact of $68 million.

The business development projects were evenly dispersed throughout the county, with three in Fredonia, two in Saukville, six in Port Washington, two in Grafton, six in Cedarburg and five in Mequon.

Highlighting the OED success stories, according to Schilling's presentation, was last fall's announced expansion plans at the Allen Edmonds Shoe Co. in Port Washington, which involved $1.5 million in state Community Development Block Grant money and $3 million in private financing.

According to the company, the project saved 200 existing jobs and will eventually create 200 new jobs.

Schilling also pointed to work the OED did earlier this year on behalf of Advanced Manufacturing Technologies in Grafton, which involved $100,000 in county revolving-loan money, $150,000 in state financing and $500,000 in private capital.

That plant expansion and purchase of inventory is expected to create 30 new jobs and retain 65 workers.

Schilling's report noted that five industries in the county have been responsible for the addition

of nearly 2,000 local jobs since 2003.

Predictably, the largest increase came in the health-care sector, which added 903 jobs. Much of that growth can be traced to the construction of the Aurora Medical Center in Grafton and expansion of the Columbia St. Mary's Ozaukee Hospital in Mequon.

Overall job growth was also noted in retail trade (304 jobs), professional and technical services (310 jobs), education services (251 jobs) and wholesale trades (185 job).

Although a spate of plant closings in the past decade has reduced its numbers, Schilling reported that the manufacturing sector remains the largest employer in the county, with 8,414 jobs — more than 25% of the local workforce.

In 2007, OED reported there were more than 10,000 jobs in the manufacturing sector.

The other top employment sectors in the county, according to the OED, are: retail trade, 4,586 jobs, 14% of the workforce; health care, 3,928 jobs, 12%; lodging and food service, 3,305 jobs, 10%; professional and technical, 2,017 jobs, 6%; and finance and insurance, 1,946 jobs, just under 6%.

With a preponderance of service-sector workers and a large number of residents working professional-level jobs outside the county, Schilling said that the average weekly wage paid for jobs in the county is $743 — lower than seven other counties and below the state average of $752.

Because of the high number of residents with out-of-county jobs, she noted the county still has the second-highest median household income in the state at $70,568. Only Waukesha County is higher, at $75,754.

Schilling's report showed relatively low unemployment and even a recent uptick.

While county unemployment levels ranged between 7.4% and 7.9% in 2009 and 2010, that number fell to 6.8% in early 2011.