

Local economy doing better than most

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A national economy picture that seems to be a daily dose of gloom and doom news isn't nearly that drastic of a portrait in San Juan County.

Yes, higher gas and food prices and other factors are having an adverse effect on local residents' pocketbooks. The bigger economic story in northwest New Mexico, however, is by and large positive.

The New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions, formerly the New Mexico Department of Labor, recently reported that the Farmington metro area added 2,000 jobs during the past year. About 1,300 of those jobs came from goods-producing industries, with more than 300 jobs overall being added in the month of April alone.

The San Juan County area's year-over-year job growth was nearly 4 percent — far above the state's job growth mark of just 1 percent.

More good news for the economy can be found when looking at Farmington's unemployment rate. The state's unemployment mark was a low 3.5 percent in April, but the Farmington area's rate was even lower at 3.2 percent.

Overall, the employment numbers game in San Juan County certainly is looking strong. Wages, however, continue to lag behind the national average. Federal figures indicate Farmington's per capita personal income average from 1996 to 2006 was \$27,155. The national average for the same 10-year period for the 363 Metropolitan Statistical Areas in the U.S. was substantially higher at \$36,714.

San Juan County's economy is built on a strong foundation centered on the local oil and gas and power plant industries. Health care, government, education, retail, financial and private services sectors also contribute heavily to the Farmington area's solid economy.

This region is fortunate to have a number of large economic-base businesses that bring in new dollars from outside San Juan County. The top individual employers in the county, according to information from San Juan Economic Development Service, are San Juan Regional Medical Center and Farmington Municipal Schools, each with more than 1,450 employees. The largest individual energy-based employer, with about 1,000 workers, is BHP Billiton, which operates coal mines at San Juan Generating Station and Four Corners Power Plant.

Both power plants and many local oil and gas companies continue to add jobs, and a fair amount of those companies have employment counts in the hundreds. America's growing demand for natural gas and electricity likely will ensure a healthy local economy for the immediate future.

County leaders, economic development specialists and employers must continue to search for more diversification opportunities in the economy for long-term economic health. The county has had its share of diversification success stories — businesses such as Wood Group Generator Services, which does global business in repairing large generators. Then again, several large employers, such as Mesa Airlines and Independent Mobility Systems, have left the area.

The bottom line here is the local economy is on firm footing for the coming years. That's something far too many other areas of the country simply cannot claim.

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