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Jobs Are Coming But Are the Workers Here?

Group seeks to find out if enough construction workers still here.

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POINCIANA | With so many major construction projects being planned in Poinciana, there are high hopes a majority of the jobs will be filled by local residents in a community hard hit by the collapse in the housing market.

But what's not clear is whether Poinciana still has a lot of qualified construction workers, said Larry Strickler, the senior vice president of public affairs for Workforce Central Florida. The Orlando-based state employment firm helps match businesses looking to hire with available workers.

Throughout the past decade, it was obvious the community did. Poinciana's growth was fueled by a boom in residential and then commercial construction projects, with plenty of construction jobs to go around.

But when the housing market collapsed in 2008, those jobs disappeared.

And the question now, said Strickler, is whether those workers are still in the area to be tapped into as a labor source.

"We knew the labor market information before the recession hit," he said. "We don't know how many are in the pipeline anymore, or who has left the state because they couldn't find a job."

Strickler has met with the members of the Poinciana Economic Development Alliance at the offices of Manhattan Kraft on Poinciana Boulevard.

Strickler and Sergio Leon, the hiring events manager for Workforce Central Florida, had been asked by the alliance members to give them advice on the best way to coordinate a series of job fairs they're sponsoring in the next six months to help match Poinciana residents with construction jobs expected to be created through some major projects now in the pipeline.

They include Poinciana's first hospital and a medical arts facility that Osceola Regional Medical Center of Kissimmee is building here, the Southport Shopping Plaza off Pleasant Hill Road, and the SunRail commuter rail station being built near the Poinciana Industrial Park. Poinciana is the final stop along the 61-mile SunRail route from Volusia County to downtown Orlando, and then into Osceola County.

Nick Murdock, a member of the alliance, said these projects are expected to generate more than 6,000 jobs in 2012 -- a big boost to the local economy.

"The job situation here is critical," Murdock said. "Even though we hear 12 percent unemployment (in Florida), I think the level of underemployment or people who have stopped looking for work is closer to 20 percent.

"We need to get people back to work and get them jobs so they can support their families," he said.

To help match local workers with those construction jobs, the alliance is sponsoring several upcoming job fairs, including the first one from 6 to 8 p.m. Sept. 22 at the Poinciana Community Center on Marigold Avenue.

In the meantime, the Poinciana Digital Village -- an online site and community resource center for Poinciana, which cuts across both Osceola and Polk counties -- is collecting resumes from local residents and putting them online.

Murdock said he invited Workforce Central Florida to meet with them to offer advice on moving forward.

"We can certainly use your assistance," he said. "We're excited about our opportunity here, but we definitely could use professional help."

Part of their challenge, Murdock said, is figuring out how many qualified workers are in the community.

"I think it's very realistic that 6,000 jobs will occur" from these construction projects, he said. "But out of those 6,000 jobs, I don't know that we have more than 200 qualified people."

Strickler said it was important to get a sense of how far people might be willing to commute from outside of Poinciana to take a construction job here.

"Do you have a sense of what would be a reasonable distance to a job?" he asked.

Murdock said a lot of Poinciana residents commute to jobs in Orlando or at the theme parks, so an hour-long commute or longer is common.

The first job fairs, Wendy Farrell, an alliance member, said, would be held before construction actually begins, since most of these projects are more likely to start in 2012.

The purpose of the first event, she said, is to help workers prepare themselves to qualify for those jobs.

Leon said the scheduled hours are not what most people attending a job fair are used to.

"I think 6 to 8 p.m. might not be a good time to do a jobs fair," he said. "Maybe you can get away with this one because it's more educational."

Job fairs tend to run from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., he said.

He said, before holding any job fairs, make sure there are actual jobs to fill.

"When you're doing the planning for the job fair, make sure everyone who has a table has job openings," he said.

Workforce Central Florida doesn't cover Polk County, but Strickler said he can work with his counterparts at Polk Works to get the necessary data.

"What we need," he said, "is a representation of the work force."

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