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Job growth for 2013 'optimistic'

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By Michael D. Pitman

Staff Writer

Several major retail and manufacturing projects, coupled with the hiring plans of some of the area's largest employers, are expected to create thousands of new jobs in 2013 and beyond for Butler and Warren county residents.

Koch Foods, which broke ground this month on an expansion to its Fairfield plant, will add about 390 jobs during the next three years. Meanwhile, Empire Foods, a food distributor that works closely with The Kroger Co., is moving forward with construction of a pork processing and packaging plant that will employ more than 200 people. And after some delays, Steiner + Associates is slated to begin work this year on its more than \$300 million retail, entertainment and office development in Liberty Twp. that would create 4,500 permanent jobs when it opens in 2015.

Area tourist attractions will also contribute greatly to new job creations. Officials at Kings Island, the Mason amusement and water park, announced Friday they would begin filling 4,000 full- and part-time positions for this season. The new Horseshoe Casino, which opens March 4 in downtown Cincinnati, started hiring last year to fill approximately 1,700 full- and part-time positions. And a new racino in Warren County's Turtlecreek Twp. has promised 700 permanent jobs (450 of them full-time) and 1,000 construction jobs by the time it opens in the first quarter of 2014.

While all of these projects are good signs for area job seekers, they don't necessarily signal that the economy is in full recovery yet.

"I'm really optimistic about 2013, but that doesn't mean there aren't headwinds," said Ben Passty, research assistant professor at the Economic Center at the University of Cincinnati. "A lot of people don't understand how meaningful the debt ceiling discussions is going to be in January, February and March. It's going to be more worrisome than the fiscal cliff discussion."

Local government officials and economic experts say they hope national debates on the debt ceiling and concerns about the healthcare law won't undo the progress being made with the two counties' unemployment rates. Butler County's unemployment rate for November 2012 — the latest data available — was at 6 percent, 3 percentage points lower than November 2011, and Warren County's rate was at 5.6 percent, 1 percentage point lower than the same time in 2011, according to the Ohio Department of Job & Family Services.

David Fehr, director of the Butler County Department of Development, said he believes the job market is "definitely trending in the right direction." He said expansion projects and the creation of new jobs, not just hiring vacant positions, are signs an economic recovery is under way. But he acknowledged some companies are still hesitant.

"There are some general uncertainties in the economy," Fehr said. "Companies we're talking to, they're concerned about the health care law and they're resistant to hire. The ones I've talked to, if they hire it might be part-time."

More than 150 people attended the Lowe's job fair Monday at Butler County Workforce One in Fairfield.

"All regional Lowe's locations will be hiring between 20 and 50 seasonal employees come spring of 2013," Hamilton Lowe's human resource manager Victor Reasinger said.

Lowe's will also hold a job fair at Warren County Workforce One on Jan. 18, for people in the area who missed Monday's opportunity.

A potential feather in the cap for Butler County is the opening of Cincinnati State Middletown, the county's first community college. Before Cincinnati State Middletown opened in August, Fehr said another big issue was hiring a qualified workforce.

Cincinnati State Middletown works to match employers with students where employers can "start training the workforce that they want," said Kelly Harper, Cincinnati State Cooperative Education coordinator. "They get the academic piece and the hands-on piece that the employer wants."

Cincinnati State received a state grant to help retain students in Ohio, Harper said.

"Once (the students) are able to go out into the workforce, they want to stay in the area and they want to work for area employers," Harper said.

Butler and Warren counties biggest industries are government, including Miami University, manufacturing, health care and retail.

MercyHealth, including its Fairfield hospital and medical practices around the region, will look to hire new and fill available nurse practitioner jobs, and fill newly created nurse care coordinator jobs, said hospital spokeswoman Nanette Bentley.

While nurse practitioners are a more highly skilled job and are essentially the "right hand of the physician," Bentley said there has been a demand for nurse care coordinators who will engage with patients at various steps of their hospital and medical practice experience, including visiting them in the hospital before discharge, home visits to determine any challenges the patient might face and periodic phone calls to ensure the patients are staying on track with their health goals.

The pilot program followed 310 patients and there was a 51 percent reduction in hospital admissions, 35 percent reduction in re-admissions and 37 percent reduction in emergency department visits.

Atrium Medical Center in Middletown is looking for experienced nurses, surgery and open heart team members, social workers, physical therapists and occupational therapists, as well as people to work in nutritional services and environmental services, said hospital spokeswoman Wendy Parks.

"The aging population does necessitate additional health care needs across the region," Parks said.

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