

East Bay jobs rise as housing falls

- **Employment opportunities up in health care, professional services**

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Goodbye, housing, and hello, health care. The East Bay fended off an employment downturn in August even though housing-related jobs deteriorated at a greater pace.

The Alameda County-Contra Costa County region has been forced to increasingly depend on an upswing in health care, professional services, private education and manufacturing jobs. That has helped the region cope with a nose dive in the home building and financing arena.

"Construction is a disaster," said Jon Haveman, a principal economist with Beacon Economics, which analyzes regional economies. "It will take 18 months to two years for the housing market to stabilize. It's going to be awhile before they put hammer to nail in that industry."

Still, even if some industries have imploded, the East Bay continues to gain jobs overall. Employment improvement has occurred both during the most recent month and the past year.

Adjusted for seasonal changes, the East Bay added 1,200 jobs during August. The one-month gain nearly reversed a loss of 1,500 jobs in July, the state's Employment Development Department reported Friday.

During the most recent 12 months, the East Bay gained 9,500 jobs. Those annual job gains represent a much slower pace than the advances posted in the region during 2006 and the early part of 2007, an indication that the region's once-sizzling economy has begun to decelerate at least a little.

During the past year, the Alameda-Contra Costa County area lost 5,900 jobs in construction, 1,000 in finance and insurance and 800 in real estate. But at the same time, the region gained 3,100 jobs in professional scientific and technical services, 2,700 in health care, 1,900 in private education, 1,900 in food services and drinking establishments and 600 in manufacturing.

In the same period, California lost 24,300 construction jobs. That means the East Bay accounted for about one-fourth of all the construction jobs that vanished in California.

East Bay job seekers offered varying assessments about how easy or difficult it is to scout for work.

"It's difficult to find a job," said Christine Bonanno, a Pittsburg resident who lost her job at a Walnut Creek escrow company when the housing and residential mortgage industries collapsed. "A lot of people were laid off from my company. I haven't found anything yet since March."

Bonanno said she is willing to take a job in pretty much any category besides the mortgage business. And she is flexible on wages.

"I don't want to stay with the mortgage industry with how bad it is right now," Bonanno said.

Fremont resident David Jones is attempting to find a job in construction design and management for hospitals or tech-related buildings and clean rooms.

"It seems like there are a lot of jobs out there in the field I want," Jones said. "I have recently found five or six jobs in the profession I want."

Sharry Starbuck, a Bay Point resident, said that even if jobs are relatively plentiful, that doesn't mean the wages are great. Starbuck is seeking work as a senior or administrative assistant.

"It's getting easier to find a job, but the pay rates are going down," Starbuck said. "Either they don't want to come up with the money or they don't want to pay benefits. I might have to look at a lower pay rate just to get back to work."

Some signs have surfaced that suggest the East Bay job market could turn very sluggish in the coming months, staffing services executives suggested.

"Employers are becoming a little more picky," said Steve Swanson, managing partner with the Oakland office of PrincetonOne, a temporary employment firm. "When an employer gets more restrictive, that could be a precursor to a downturn."

Still, officials with staffing companies PrincetonOne and Adecco said employers are hiring at a brisk pace. Plenty of openings exist, said Kerry Kiley, Pleasanton-based manager of Adecco's Bay Area operations.

"We're seeing a lot of requests for business support, including executive and administrative assistants, accounting and finance jobs," Kiley said. "Our health care and technical divisions are very busy."

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