

Layoffs stuck in 15-month spiral

By George Avalos staff writer

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The job market in the East Bay and California nosedived in February, as employers shed jobs at a devastating pace, according to a report released Friday.

During February, the East Bay lost 4,000 jobs, while 116,000 jobs vanished in California. Both numbers were adjusted for seasonal changes. The jobless rate in California shot to 10.5 percent last month, the state's Employment Development Department (EDD) reported.

"This downturn still has a way to go," said Jon Haveman, an economist and partner with Beacon Economics. "The housing market still has a couple more problems in its cylinders."

The East Bay has now lost jobs for 15 straight months, according to the EDD. During that dreadful stretch, the Alameda County-Contra Costa County area has lost 47,300 jobs, on a seasonally adjusted basis. The last time the region's struggling economy created jobs was in November 2007.

The San Mateo-San Francisco-Marin area lost 7,100 jobs, and San Joaquin County lost 1,400 jobs, during February, adjusted for seasonal changes.

Over the 12 months that ended in February, the East

Bay lost nearly 41,000 jobs.

The housing market's collapse has battered the East Bay to a greater extent than most other metro areas.

"The East Bay will certainly lag behind in its recovery," Haveman said. "And California is ground zero for what is happening in the economy. We expect California to trail the national economy."

One tiny glimmer of hope emerged from the report: It appears that the East Bay has finally begun to lose jobs at a slower rate than California.

During the most recent 12 months, East Bay employment shrank by 3.9 percent.

California employment over the same period fell by 4 percent. For a number of months, the pace of East Bay employment losses had outstripped those of California.

Still, that was little comfort to the many people who are out of work, looking for full-time employment, or are seeking jobs at better pay.

"It's definitely a lot harder to find work," said Anna Torres, a Martinez resident who is working part time but wants full-time work.

Torres has been looking for a 40-hour gig for six to eight months, she said.

"I'm open to anything," Torres said. "Most places aren't hiring right now."

Ken Noble of Oakland is a 54-year-old computer technician who has found it tough to compete against the 20-somethings who are also seeking work in his field. Noble also wants a full-time job.

"I've been looking for a long time," Noble said. "But

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I've been picking and choosing."

At the East Bay One-Stop Career Center in Concord, Stephen Baiter, administrator of the center, is seeing many more people who have never sought employment services at the facility before.

"There are people coming in now who have never been through our doors before," Baiter said.

Between July 2008 and February of this year, 10,900 first-time customers have visited the career center seeking services, he said. During 2008, the organization served an average of 474 daily visitors. Now, the number is running at 612 daily visitors — a 29 percent jump.

"We are seeing a lot more people with advanced skills, human resources, sales, marketing, I.T. (information technology) backgrounds than before," Baiter said.

When will the slump end?

"There is more pain to come," Haveman said. "We are optimistic things will bottom out in early 2010."

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