

County jobs at record level

By JOHN LOWMAN | Posted: Friday, January 27, 2012 2:00 am

ANGLETON — Employment in Brazoria County is at record levels and expected to continue climbing, economist Donald Payne told attendees of a business luncheon.

First-time unemployment claims fell in November, the last month for which complete data is available, said Payne, an economics professor at Brazosport College. He addressed about 250 people at the Economic Development Alliance for Brazoria County's quarterly membership meeting Thursday at the Central Brazoria County Business Park.

County businesses employed 140,724 people in November, "setting a new record for employment in the county," Payne said. The average worker put in 48.4 hours per week, indicating further potential job gains.

"That's a significant number and it looks like it's going to continue," he said. "Historically, employers don't want to pay their employees 8.4 hours overtime."

According to figures from the Brazosport College Economic Forecasting Center, the county's unemployment rate is 8.4 percent, down from 9 percent in November 2010. The state unemployment rate in December was 7.8 percent, and it was 8.5 percent nationwide, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"The economy is continuing to expand in Brazoria County," Payne said.

Consumer confidence fell in October but rebounded in November, and he said that positive trend probably will continue. Sales tax revenues were up about 6 percent from October 2010 to October 2011 while hotel-motel tax receipts climbed as well.

While four months of 2011 were rocky, forecasts of a double-dip recession — following on the heels of the crash of a couple of years ago — likely won't materialize, Payne said.

"It's totally different than 2007," he said. "I don't think there's any reason to be concerned. The economy is doing well."

Phyllis Saathoff, managing director of Port Freeport, told attendees that facility remains the 16th busiest in the nation in terms of foreign tonnage and 27th in total tonnage. More than 27.4 million tons of goods go through the port per year, she said.

More than 3,000 vessels travel in and out of the port annually along with 155,000 trucks and 50,000 rail cars, she said. Items shipped through the port include clothing, chemicals, paper, plastics, resins, rice, fruit and windmill parts.

"A good mix of commodities moves through our port," Saathoff said. "The port is growing its

revenue base and leaning less on ad valorem taxes. ... The port belongs to the taxpayers. We're going to be good stewards of your assets."

In 1991, the port levied a tax of 10 cents per \$100 of appraised value on county property owners. That rate is 5.3 cents now.

Port goals include deepening the channel to 55 feet and widening it to 600 feet to accommodate larger ships, she said. Alliance CEO Robert Worley asked Saathoff if an ongoing delay in that project was political. She said only in that the Corps of Engineers isn't receiving the funding it needs to move forward with several items.

Interested Brazoria County residents should become informed about the port, then contact their elected officials to help move the project along, she said. Ongoing improvements to the Panama Canal likely will result in increased traffic at Port Freeport, she said.

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