

Fair-weather work: Seasonal job market unpredictable

Seasonal jobs on the rise, but so is number of people wanting them

Pensacola News Journal

February 26, 2011

Pensacola, FL - Jesse Mitchem used to build hotels for a living.

Now he works for one.

Like thousands of other construction workers along the Gulf Coast, Mitchem's career was cut short by the housing collapse and subsequent recession.

After 20 years in the construction trades, he found himself among the 23,500 people in the Pensacola Bay Area looking for a job.

"When the economy fell out, the work dried up," he said. "And it's been hit or miss since then."

So, when a seasonal maintenance job opened up earlier this month at the Holiday Inn Express on Pensacola Beach, he jumped on it.

"I'm hoping it will turn into a long-term job," the 42-year-old Mitchem said. "I've been looking for a steady job for two years now. I have a family to support."

Mitchem is among the first wave of employees currently being hired by area hotels and restaurants to cope with a six-month tourist season that starts in March, peaks in mid-July and runs through Labor Day.

And by most accounts, seasonal jobs are going to be much more plentiful this year than 2010 when tourism was crippled by the April BP oil spill.

"We are hiring for spring right now," Innisfree Hotels President Harlan Butler said. "Last year we had to lay people off because of the BP oil spill. It was a bad summer for seasonal employment. We never did ramp up to full capacity."

Innisfree owns three hotels on Pensacola Beach that include the Hampton Inn, Hilton and the brand new, 206-room Holiday Inn Resort, which opened late last week with a staff of 60 full-time and seasonal jobs.

Like many Pensacola Beach hoteliers, Butler is expecting 2011 will be a strong rebound year.

"We're anticipating our best year since 2007," he said. "And we're hoping it will be the best year ever."

Restaurants also are staffing up in anticipation of the spring and summer crowds.

On Perdido Key, Shrimp Basket co-owner David Cahoon expects 2011 to be far busier than last year, and he's adding seasonal jobs in anticipation.

"We'll probably have seven or eight waitresses on staff, two or three bussing tables and six in the kitchen," he said. "That's two or three more than we had last year. We just feel people are ready to put all the negative stuff about the oil spill behind them and get back to the beach."

The strong and early start to this year's spring break season has Kevin Hayes, business manager for Paradise Bar & Grill, Paradise Beach Homes and Paradise Motel, actively hiring seasonal workers.

"We're already hiring for summer, some full-time positions and some seasonal," he said. "I would say across the three companies we will hire an additional 12 people over the summer."

Just last week Hayes hired four new servers for the bar and grill, and expects the summer staff numbers to swell by 25 percent over 2010 numbers.

Beverly McCay, manager of the Holiday Inn Express on Pensacola Beach, said she, too, is in the process of doubling her staff, from a core group of 25 during winter to 50 during the spring and summer. That's about the same number of seasonal workers she had on staff last year.

Unlike many beach-area hotels, McCay did not reduce the hotel's workforce last year despite the oil spill's effect on tourism.

"We didn't have to lay anyone off in 2010 because we picked up a lot of (U.S.) Parks Service and other federal officials here because of the oil spill," McCay said.

While seasonal jobs may be more plentiful this year than last, the number of applicants also are increasing.

Linda Stone was among 300 people to apply for a single position with a Pensacola Beach resort rental company.

Laid off late last year from a real estate firm, Stone said she was braced for a long and difficult period of unemployment.

But a recent spike in seasonal demand for beach rental homes, coupled with her experience and knowledge of specialized software, helped land her the coveted job.

"I definitely feel very lucky to have gotten a job in just a few months," the 55-year-old Stone said. "I have 30 years of experience in customer service and some experience in the travel industry, and I think that certainly helped me get the job."

Demand for seasonal workers is increasing, but Workforce Escarosa spokesman Tom Ousley notes it's having little overall effect on the overall jobs market. Workforce Escarosa is a non-profit, federally and state funded job resource center with offices in Pensacola, Milton and Century.

The Pensacola Bay Area's unemployment rate has been stuck in the 10-to-11 percent range for more than a year and a half.

"We're not getting requests from seasonal employers, and we're surprised by that," he said. "Right now, with so many job seekers out there, employers don't have to advertise. They don't need us. They've got people beating down the doors."

Other factors affecting the seasonal jobs market are generally a low rate of pay and the fact that very few turn into permanent positions, according to Valarie Cole, senior human resources specialist for Pensacola-based Landrum Staffing.

"A lot of people will tell us they want a seasonal job until they find out what it will pay," she said, adding that a typical seasonal housekeeping job at local hotels and motels will average \$8.50 an hour.

"But people are getting so desperate for a job many are willing to take anything," she said. "But a very low percentage of people who get hired for seasonal jobs get hired permanently."

But those who do, Cole added, are workers who "show a willingness to learn, show up for work on time with a positive attitude and a smile on their face, and are willing to learn."