

Living in the low-economy bubble

Part II
■ Despite promise of industry nearby, 'Comeback Kid' may not include Choctaw

By Dee Ann Campbell
 The Choctaw Sun

GILBERTOWN — "The greatest comeback kid we've seen in years" — that's how Southern Business and Development Magazine describes Alabama's ongoing economic turnaround. With a substantial increase in new jobs, a dropping unemployment rate, and the promise of more industry in the near future, Alabama appears on the brink of economic prosperity — a 'comeback' that has the nation taking notice.

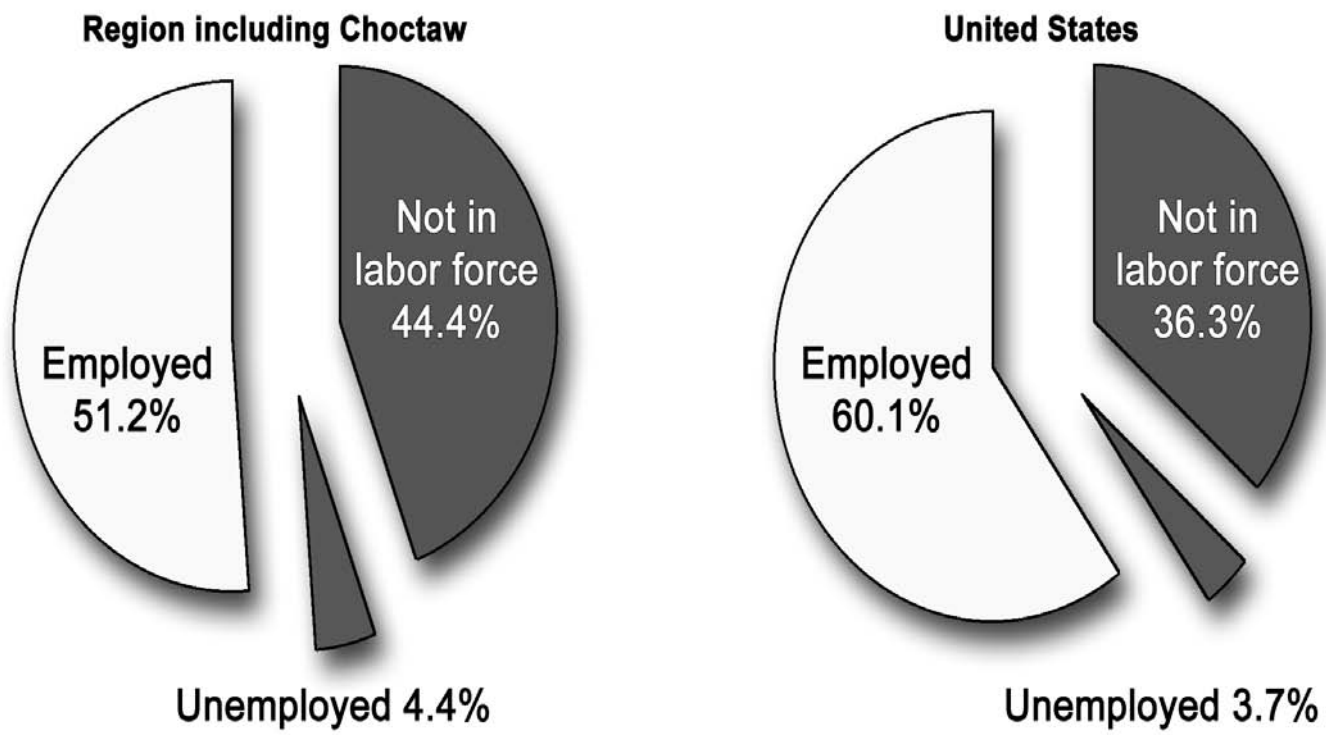
But there are areas of the state that are not yet part of that 'comeback'.

Despite glowing economic reports statewide — and the potential of new jobs with the coming of the ThyssenKrupp steel plant to be built near Calvert — economic prosperity may be slower coming to the low-economy bubble that includes Choctaw County.

When Southern Business and Development Magazine praised Alabama in its most recent edition, the publication listed the state among the top ten in several categories — none of which relate to Choctaw or surrounding counties. The listing included accolades for Governor Bob Riley as one of the "Top 10 People Who Made a Difference", the City of Birmingham as one of the "Top 10 Great Locations to Raise a Family", the City of Huntsville as one of the "Top 10 Places in the South for Emerging Growth Industries", and the University of Alabama at Birmingham as one of the "Top 10 Universities that Drive Economic Development".

The one category that

Residents participating in the work force



Choctaw Sun graphics by Mickey Bryant

may have a bearing on Choctaw County — the state's listing as one of the "Top 10 Inland Waterways in the South" — does not indicate economic progress that has occurred along the waterway that borders the county.

A total of 568 companies located or expanded in Alabama last year, adding some 24,780 new jobs and more than \$3.1 billion in capital investment. Yet, a relative handful of those new jobs remotely affected Choctaw.

The new \$4.19 billion steel plant is projected to employ about 2,700 workers with potentially more than 38,000 new supplier, production, and service jobs spinning off from the industry. The plant may, in fact, provide a number of jobs for Choctaw County workers, as well. But even with the steel plant, projections for job growth in the state over the next few years rarely include Choctaw.

According to a report entitled "Alabama's Long-Term Occupational Predictions" compiled in June of this year, the state is expected to see an increase to about 2.4 million jobs by the year 2014, with those projections not including the ThyssenKrupp plant. The state's projected increase in employment encompasses several occu-

pations, including a jump to about 524,000 jobs in professional occupations, 611,000 jobs in service and sales, 346,000 in office and administrative support occupations, 138,000 in construction and extraction jobs, more than 530,000 jobs in maintenance, repair, production, and transportation positions, and huge increases in both computer-related occupations and health-care.

In April, Alabama's unemployment rate fell to 3.3%, slightly less than the 3.4% recorded for the previous month. Employment in April grew by 5,700, and over the past 12 months employment in the state has grown by 30,800.

Yet, the Choctaw County area has a depressed workforce that is not reflected in the bright unemployment figures recently released by the state, and the county is in a region of the state that is slated to lose more jobs in the next few years. According to projections, by 2014 the estimated number of people employed in this region of the state will have dropped by 1,280 workers, down from 43,590 to 42,310.

Only a few occupations show increases in the Choctaw County region. Healthcare and social services jobs are predicted to

climb slightly. However, the prediction suggests that production occupations will see the sharpest decline, dropping over 500 workers in the next few years. While the new steel plant may alleviate some of that loss of jobs, the majority of workers who gain jobs with the plant may or may not come from Choctaw County.

According to a report put together by the new WIRED (Workforce Innovation in Regional Workforce Development) initiative — a federal grant project focusing on economic development for the region including 37 counties in West Alabama and East Mississippi (WAEM) — over the past 10 years, the region has added jobs at a much slower pace than the nation as a whole. In fact, only a quarter of the region's counties have actually gained a measurable number of jobs in the past decade, and only Tuscaloosa County has shown what is considered a large increase in the percentage of jobs brought into the area.

Yet, even when jobs are added in the area, they are predominantly low-wage jobs that offer little chance for prosperity and little reason for young workers to stay. Even those new jobs in Tuscaloosa County are

mainly low-wage jobs, according to the WIRED report.

The region already has a smaller percentage of residents who are participating in the workforce than in the nation as a whole. Compared with U.S. numbers, the region has a higher percentage of youth, but fewer workers in their prime. According to the U.S. Census, the population of this region of the state has about 2% fewer adults between the ages of 35 and 44 living in the area than does the rest of the nation. Likewise, there are at least 1% fewer residents between the ages of 45 and 54.

If the findings of a Choctaw Sun survey conducted last year come to fruition, those statistics may not change without a substantial change in the job market in the area.

The survey revealed that a whopping 51% of high school seniors stated that they planned to leave the county after graduation, with more considering leaving not only the county but the state. Only a scant 11% said that they planned to stay in the county to work and raise their families.

And for those who do live in the area, a lower percentage actually participate in the workforce. While about 36.3% of U.S.

adult residents are not in the workforce, 44.4% of adults in this region do not work. (NOTE: These numbers indicate total numbers of residents not in labor force, but do not necessarily indicate those who are claiming unemployment benefits.)

For those young workers who do stay in the area, the availability of well-paying jobs will undoubtedly be dependent upon the promotion of the area to industries who are looking to locate in the South. Even if more industrial jobs become available to local residents, the key to getting those jobs could be in the availability of a trained workforce — something that has been sorely lacking in the area.

While Alabama is one of 38 states to offer Career Tech diplomas and a high school pathway for industry-recognized certificates or licenses upon graduation, not all school systems within the state do so. The Choctaw County School System offers several Career Tech courses, with a high completion rate among those students who take that avenue during high school. However, the availability of different types of Career Tech courses in local high schools is limited due to funding. There is also no avenue for students to leave high school with a certificate or license in a particular technical field.

There are, however, several avenues for technical education through Alabama Southern Community College. Yet, relatively few local students are taking advantage of those programs.

While the good news keeps coming for Alabama's economic outlook — and some of that good news may impact Choctaw County — without major changes within the next few years, residents in this part of the state may continue to live in a low-economy bubble, isolated and alienated from the economic progress that is impacting the remainder of the state.

With the rest of the state touted as the 'greatest comeback kid in years', Choctaw County's 'comeback' is yet to be seen.

(ED. NOTE: Don't miss Part III of this series, coming up in the Sun.)

All counties in state now under fire alert

By Tommy Campbell
 The Choctaw Sun

MONTGOMERY — With more than half of Alabama under "extreme drought" conditions, State Forester Linda Casey last Friday placed all 67 counties under a fire alert after a fast-moving cold front that swept through the region on Wednesday provided only enough rainfall

to "settle the dust" in most areas.

According to the U.S. Geological Survey Drought Monitor Center, more than one-half of the state is suffering from "extreme" drought conditions, and the other half is teetering on the edge of being added to that list.

To show how bad the situation has become in the past month, as of late March, only four percent

of the state was considered in "extreme" drought.

Weather officials said the amount of rain received last week was not enough to relieve the dry conditions that have been slowly worsening for the past two years, and that the chance of appreciable rainfall over the next week is "slim to none", forecasters said.

The month of May normally brings as much as five inches of rain to most parts of the state, but as of Monday, many counties had received only one-half inch or less.

The fire alert, which took effect at 9 a.m. on May 18th, allows the AFC to restrict the issuance of burning permits.

Forestry officials say the potential for a forest fire to get out of hand is as high as they have seen it in years and that the alert will remain in effect until enough rain is received to eliminate the problem.

As a result, no outdoor burning should be done until further notice. Persons who burn without a permit risk being arrested and fined, officials said, and could be held responsible financially and legally for any damage that fire they set causes should it get out of hand. One weather forecaster said that while he

certainly did not mean to wish any calamity on any part of the nation, the best chance that the entire southeast has of getting any appreciable rainfall over the next six months can be summed up in two words: tropical storm.



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