

Unemployment rate reaches 8-year high

By Rebecca Bunch
Staff Writer

Chowan County has tied two other North Carolina counties — Halifax and Wilson — for the seventh highest jobless rate in the state.

According to preliminary data from the North Carolina Employment Security Commission, the county posted an unemployment rate of 8 percent for May, the most recent month for which figures are available.

Local ESC Director Ricky Coltrain said that in checking records dating back to the mid-1990s the highest jobless rate he found was in July 2000 when Chowan County posted a 9.2 unemployment rate.

But, he noted, that rate dropped to below 5 percent the next month.

He said he did not see a possible decline in unemployment happening this time so abruptly, given all the recent plant layoffs and business closings.

"I think we're going to see it

hang around for a while."

In fact, Coltrain said that state employment staff have been predicting in recent months that the current trend could last for up to three years.

That's something local business leaders are hoping will not be the case.

Edenton-Chowan Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Richard Bunch said the current situation is causing local businesses to operate under some very difficult conditions.

He added he believed the businesses "would be stronger" for having gone through this.

"We must do whatever we can to support our businesses at this point," Bunch said.

With a labor force of 7,342 workers; 587 of those are currently without employment, the state ESC said.

Other area counties averaged much lower jobless rates for May, according to the commission.

Currituck County reported the lowest unemployment rate in

North Carolina for the month.

Those include:

- Bertie, 6.6%
- Currituck, 3.3%
- Dare, 4.7%
- Gates, 5.0%
- Hertford, 6.3%
- Pasquotank, 6.5%
- Perquimans, 6.1%
- Tyrrell, 6.3%
- Washington, 6.7%

Ninety-two of North Carolina's 100 counties reported increased unemployment for May.

Housing one step closer

RiverSound and Beechwood clear next hurdle

By Rebecca Bunch and Earline White
Staff Writers

By cutting the number of lots and placing conservation protection policies on all wetlands, RiverSound on Drummond's Point Road has been approved for rezoning by the county.

The unanimous vote by the county commissioners came a month after the developer's application was tabled following comments from the public on flood control, water quality, wetlands and concentration.

During the commissioner's meeting Monday morning, a handful of county residents continued to challenge the developers about effects of density on a rural area, possible impact to schools and timber management.

RiverSound, a waterfront community along the Yeopim River, has been three years in the making.

Originally slated to be a 380-unit gated community, RiverSound was approved Monday for 299 units which equals a loss of nearly \$3 million to the Waterfront Group developers, RiverSound officials said.

Roadwork and electricity is more than 50 percent complete at the development.

Beechwood gets okay

Beechwood Developers met no opposition from the public Monday night for a conditional use application for a subdivision stretching from Virginia to Paradise Roads.

The application covers Phase I of the project — construction of 48 condos at 1311 Paradise Road.

The parcel of land comprises just over 23 acres.

Prior to giving its recommendation to the Town Council, the planning board offered suggestions with regard to the project including:

- The developer shall post a bond to provide for all necessary traffic improvements, for utility connections, and for drainage/storm-water improvements.
- Storm water/drainage shall meet state and local regulations.
- A landscape plan for the project is to be reviewed for approval.
- Building design and architectural details will be reviewed by staff.

The request will go before the Council in August.

Gas prices no bonanza for local retailers

By Vernon Fueston
Contributing Writer

The sign on the pump says it all.

Gas prices have risen so high, so fast, that the spinning numbers on Douglas Baird's nine-year old pumps at Westover Store in Edenton can't keep up.

It can only handle prices up to \$3.999 per gallon.

It may be weeks before the new pumps come in.

Where gas prices will be by then, he said, are anybody's guess.

But the skyrocketing price of gasoline doesn't have him celebrating.

"I can put whatever price I want on gasoline," he said. "But I have seven days to pay for it. If I buy \$6,000 worth of gasoline and I only sell \$3,000 of it, I still have to pay for it."

Baird said there is fierce competitive pressure on fuel merchants to keep a lid on the prices. Everybody is watching that price carefully. Then they go where gas is the cheapest.

All that pressure has led to stagnant or even shrinking profits for retailers as they struggle to keep customers coming in.

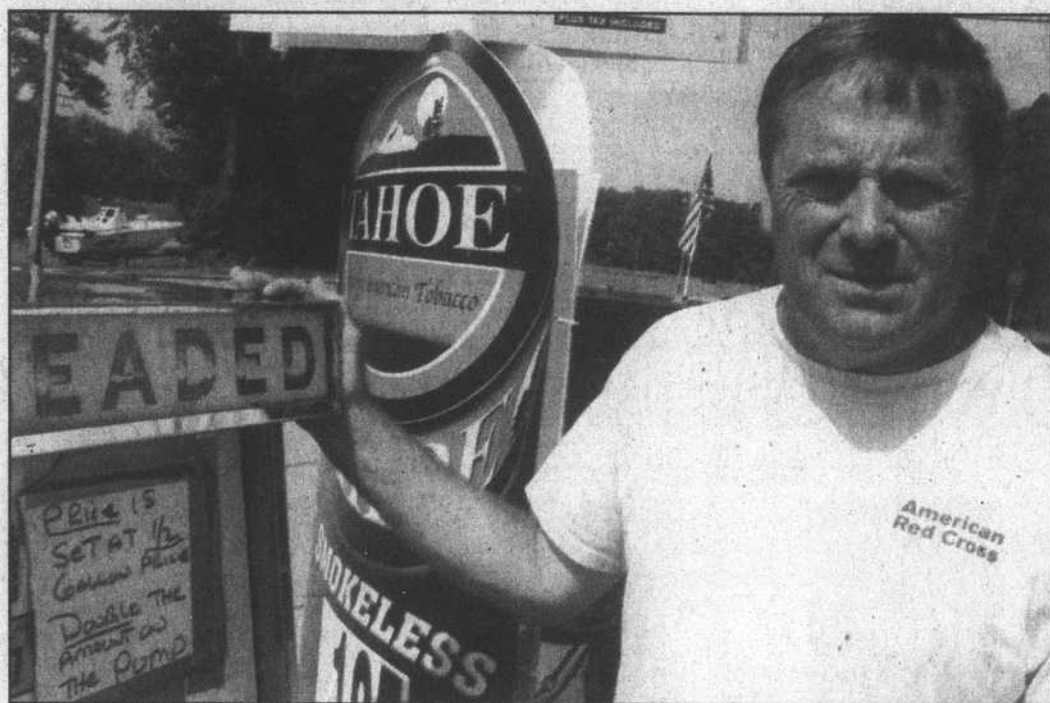
"You basically make 8 or 12 cents per gallon," Baird said. "It's the same amount you were making when gas was two dollars per gallon. Sometimes the margins are even less."

With the profit on a gallon of gas the same as it was when it was selling at half the price, the percentage Baird makes on a dollar's worth of gasoline has dropped in half as the price has doubled.

The bottom line — rising gas prices have not created a bonanza for retailers.

For most, their bottom lines have remained stagnant since the days of two-dollar gas. That means retailers like Baird have had to use the same dollars to meet the rising cost of doing business.

Baird said all that has forced independent dealers to look elsewhere for the profits that will keep their



Vernon Fueston
Douglas Baird, owner of Westover Store in Edenton, stands next to his gas pump. The pump can only register prices to \$3.999 per gallon, so he must set the price at half and calculate the true charge at his cash register.

businesses running. In Baird's case, he depends on a brisk traffic in deli sandwiches.

He looks at gasoline sales as a sideline.

"My (gasoline) operation is a convenience for the customer," Baird said. "I don't have to sell a thousand gallons of gasoline per day to get by."

It's not only small independents who have weaned themselves from their dependence on gasoline profits. The big chain gas sta-

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Local employers cut costs and some employees

By Rebecca Bunch
Staff Writer

The downturn in the local economy is prompting more layoffs and closings.

Some agencies are looking at creative ways to cut expenses as well.

On Thursday Regulator Marine trimmed 14 jobs as a result of changes in its production schedule, said Human Resources Director Rex Anderson.

Anderson cited "the general national economic downturn and specifically the malaise in the boating industry" as the primary reasons for the reduction in staff.

On Friday, Albemarle Regional Health Services will eliminate the Adult Day Health Care that has been carried out since 2002 at the

Chowan Life Center in Edenton.

ARHS Public Information Officer Jill Jordan described the move as difficult, but added that "due to financial situations, (we) cannot continue to subsidize the program." She said that five employees would be "affected" by the situation.

Jordan said families currently being served by the program were being assisted by staff members during the transition and given the option of being transported to the DayBreak Adult Day Health Care Center in Elizabeth City.

She said that the Environmental Health, Albemarle Home Care and Albemarle Hospice staff currently housed there would continue to be based at the center. Clinical services, she said, will be relocated to the site in the near future.

Cutting costs

The Edenton-Chowan Recreation Department announced Monday it will close the Northern Chowan Community Center on Saturdays during August.

Recreation Director Robbie Laughton said the action was being taken as part of an effort to cut expenses and to conserve energy at the center.

He said that typically Saturdays during the summer is when the smallest number of people come to the center.

"We are looking for ways to cut our operation costs and this seems like a logical choice," he said.

Laughton said the center would still open on Saturdays for special events and rentals and would be open during normal hours the re-

mainder of each week.

He said the center would resume opening on Saturdays after Labor Day.

Cutting hours

Also, the county's trash convenience sites will be closed on Wednesdays as a cost-cutting measure according to Chowan County Finance Officer Lisa Jones.

Jones said the move is expected to save the county \$20,000 annually.

She said that the closing may well become permanent but added that county officials would be monitoring the situation "to see how things go."

The four sites will stay open during regular operating hours the remaining six days a week.

FIRST COTTON BLOSSOM SPOTTED IN COUNTY



Mike Williams

Neal Bass, Beechfork Farms, shows off the first reported cotton bloom of the 2008 season on June 30 with sons Hunter, left and Michael, right. Dry weather had held back the cotton crop earlier this season, but a timely shower the night prior was all Bass' cotton plants needed. Kenji and Kaz Goodwin brought in a cotton bloom to the Herald office.

A fabulous show



Earline White/The Chowan Herald

About 6,000 people turned out for the Chowan Edenton Optimist Club's Fabulous Fourth of July fireworks show.



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