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'Depression-level' unemployment dampens spirits in the Glades



Gary Coronado/The Post

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Randy Virgil, 44, of Pahokee, owner of Deals on Wheels car wash and detail, dries off a car in a vacant lot next to what use to be a Kentucky Fried Chicken in Pahokee Wednesday. "They find out where you are at and one car leads to another," says Randy who started the business a year ago after losing his job working for Barnard Parsons Joint Venture Project.



Gary Coronado/The Post

Downtown blues in Belle Glade: Avenue A in the historical downtown is nearly deserted on a recent Saturday. The county says that 40 percent of Glades-area residents are out of work.

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By **JENNIFER SORENTTRUE AND JASON SCHULTZ**

Palm Beach Post Staff Writers

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Last year, Javoski Harvey was earning \$27 an hour as a heavy-equipment operator building an \$800 million reservoir near South Bay.

Now, he washes cars in a Pahokee parking lot, making about \$320 in a good week. He works for his uncle, Randy Virgil, another laid-off worker from the reservoir project, which the state canceled last year.

All the time, Harvey searches desperately for a better-paying job, almost certain he'll have to leave the Glades.

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"You can't go on job Web sites and find postings for Belle Glade or Pahokee," he said. "At this point, if somebody offered me a job in Afghanistan, I'd take it."

He is far from alone.

The Palm Beach County Economic Development Office says joblessness in the Glades reached "Depression levels" this summer, with 32 percent of people unemployed, compared with a countywide rate of about 11 percent. Including people who have given up seeking jobs, 40 percent of people in the Glades are out of work, the agency said in August.

"The Glades is a community with no visible means of support, a situation that is creating angry and disenfranchised adults with few options to a stable and productive life," the agency reported.

Unemployed residents, and those working low-paying jobs to get by, say "depression" is a good way to describe the Glades.

"I'm losing hope all the time," said Leslie Bouie of Pahokee, who has been searching for work for more than a year after the doctor's office where she was a medical assistant closed. "People are just struggling."

Poverty the norm

The August study painted a bleak picture of the Glades.

Poverty is the norm, it found, with nearly 40 percent of residents receiving food stamps and 85 percent of students getting free or reduced-price school lunches.

"There are so many people that come into the church looking for help," said Rosa Ramirez, who volunteers at a church and works at a day-care center for children of migrant workers. "They don't have work, their unemployment has run out and they have exhausted their food stamps. They don't have any health insurance."

Residents say desperation has worsened crime in the Glades cities, where the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office took over patrols in 2005 and 2006.

"It's the forcing of people's hands," Harvey said. "I need to feed my family, and what are you leaving me to do? I can go out on the corner and make \$20 or \$30."

Residents point to the region's farming-dependent economy as the source of the growing joblessness. Industrial farming companies, especially sugar growers, have increased automation and continue to streamline. U.S. Sugar Corp. closed its Bryant Mill near Pahokee in 2007 and is preparing to sell almost half its land to the state for the Everglades restoration.

"The labor market, beyond sugar, is nothing," Harvey said. "It is still a giant plantation here."

Kevin Johns, head of the county's economic development office, said one obstacle to attracting other good jobs to the Glades is a land

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shortage. Most of the suitable land for economic development is controlled by sugar companies or prisons, he said.

Early this decade, agencies such as the South Florida Water Management District and the Army Corps of Engineers predicted that their \$10.9 billion Everglades restoration would create construction jobs in the region. That effort included the state's \$800 million reservoir project near South Bay, which brought Harvey and Virgil jobs with a district contractor.

But the district canceled the reservoir last year after it began pursuing the U.S. Sugar land deal. Most of the other promised jobs never materialized.

People such as Jermaine Webb, a self-employed graphic designer in Belle Glade, blame the cities and county for not doing enough to diversify the economy beyond farming. But he said residents deserve some blame for becoming dependent on government aid and not doing more for themselves.

"People here have gotten very content with the way things are going, and that is sad," Webb said.

Long drive, low wages

Other residents have little choice but to commute more than 40 miles to the coast to work.

"I have friends who drive to West Palm Beach to work at Burger King," Harvey said.

Alex McCollum of Canal Point said he made the drive to West Palm Beach while working for a company that made hurricane shutters, until he was laid off eight months ago. Now he lives with his parents, rides a bus because his car broke down and occasionally plays keyboard in a band at a local church for \$75.

McCollum said others turn to the unofficial handyman business, but that doesn't pay much.

"People take a lot of under-the-table jobs painting or gardening or fixing somebody's car," he said. "You might normally charge \$300 to cut a big yard, but out here they'll offer \$100 and you'll take it."

Virgil took the money he made working construction and went into business for himself. He bought two portable water tanks, put them in the back of two trailers pulled by pickup trucks and opened Deals on Wheels, a car-washing service that operates out of a parking lot in Pahokee.

After expenses, he is lucky if he clears \$500 to \$750 a week, he said.

Virgil said his business shows there are people who want to work, if only the opportunities existed.

Being out of work "lowers your self-esteem," he said. "But I overcame the obstacles and now I am going to provide a service. I am not going to just take from anyone."

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Trying to attract jobs

Leaders from the county and all three cities said they are working hard to attract jobs.

Johns pointed to multimillion-dollar redevelopment projects in downtown Belle Glade and Pahokee designed to lure residents and visitors. A separate effort to dredge the rim canal along Lake Okeechobee will help bring boaters back, he said.

Pahokee Mayor Wayne Whitaker said he is trying to lure an airplane parts manufacturer, a hotel and a company that would grow sorghum to make biofuel.

South Bay City Manager Corey Alston said he has a plan to revitalize his city, the smallest of the three. He wants to annex unincorporated land and use 120 city-owned acres to attract commercial and industrial developers.

"Our aspiration is to expand the limits of the city going south and going west," Alston said. "We're willing to offer city-owned land, tax abatements, expedited permitting, whatever we can do as a city to get developers here."

But the region's most ambitious redevelopment proposal is hitting rough waters.

Leaders of all three cities have been lobbying the Port of Palm Beach to create a rail-linked inland port on land owned by Florida Crystals Corp. near South Bay. Port officials are expected to decide on Dec. 17, despite criticism of the proposed site from state planners and environmental regulators who say it could interfere with the Everglades restoration.

Webb questioned whether such efforts would do much for the region unless unemployed farm workers are trained to work in those businesses.

"If you're not trained as a workforce, you could bring a million jobs in here and they'll just hire people from someplace else," Webb said.

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