

SOUTHERN NEVADA ECONOMY

Out of job, not options

Observers advise job seekers to stay calm, stay positive, keep looking

By HUBBLE SMITH

LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

From applying for unemployment benefits to modifying a home mortgage, surviving the economic downturn could become a matter of learning how to work the system.

Nevada's unemployment rate is approaching double digits (the rate was 9.1 percent in December, data show). Tens of thousands of jobs vanished in gaming and hospitality, construction and real estate-related business in 2008, part of the 2.6 million job losses nationwide. The carnage is expected to worsen this year.

Homeowners are having trouble drawing equity from their homes and casino workers are seeing their lifeblood of tips dwindling from fewer and tighter gamblers.

It doesn't look promising for Michael Bonds. The 54-year-old warehouse worker lost his job in November and had to move in with his son and daughter-in-law. He rides the bus two hours each way from his home to the JobConnect employment center in North Las Vegas in hope of finding work.

"Stay consistent," the Tennessee native tells job seekers. "Keep looking. There are jobs out there, but you've gotta keep at it. It (has) never been this hard for me. I've never had to use unemployment until now. It's a little too tight right now."

Help is out there, said Lynn Baird, assistant manager of the Southern Nevada Unemployment Insurance operations center, a division of Nevada Department of Employment, Training and Rehabilitation.

"Probably the first thing to do is obviously remain calm," Baird said. "That's easy to say, not so easy to do. I've been in that position, all of a sudden out of a job. It's frustrating. We're here to help the people of Nevada."

The application for filing an unemployment claim can be completed in 15 to 30 minutes online at www.expressclaim.org. To file by phone, the Southern Nevada number is 486-0350.

Baird said it's best to file online as the phone lines are usually jammed.

► SEE OPTIONS PAGE 6E

"We're taking thousands of calls," he said. "We're here Saturday morning taking calls. It's not uncommon for phone lines to be busy, busy, busy. We can't even dial out sometimes."

"When you dial in, if it doesn't ring busy, you know you're in. You may need to press option buttons. Sometimes it goes silent for several seconds. Just kind of be patient."

Accuracy is essential when filing a claim, Baird said.

Have all of the necessary information ready, including your Social Security number and the names, addresses and dates worked for your last two employers.

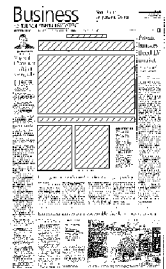
People who've been fired from their jobs are disqualified from unemployment benefits, though individual cases can be reviewed, Baird said.

"One thing on the Internet is if they say they're not able or available to accept work, or if they get vacation pay or money to go to school, they've got to call the claims center and we'll work it through," he said.

Claims can be based on Nevada wages or out-of-state wages. Benefits are not calculated by need, but by the amount of wages earned during a base period, defined as the first four of the last five calendar quarters before the initial claim.

Bonds said he went to the unemployment office the day he was laid off and received his first check within a week.

Job searches can be long and tedious, said Doug Geinzer, online advertising director for Recruiting



Nevada. He suggests extending your network by reaching out to friends, family and former colleagues who may know of job openings and can get you an interview with a manager.

"The main point is to maintain a positive frame of mind throughout the process," Geinzer said. "Employers don't want to hear the negative. They want to hear you're motivated and what you can bring to the table for them."

Some sectors are still hiring, particularly government and health care, he said. Otherwise, it might be a good time to take classes and learn new skills.

Farrow Smith Jr. grew up in Henderson and worked as director of corporate development for Las Vegas insurance agency Orgill/Singer until being laid off about six months ago. He searches Web sites such as careerbuilder.com about twice a week and picks up job leads from his network of friends at the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce and the Nevada Development Authority.

He's interviewed with other insurance carriers and a Detroit construction company that decided not to fill its position for development director in Las Vegas.

"In the old days, you'd drop off a résumé and have a contact person and follow up with a phone call," Smith said. "These days, they seem not to want the follow-up, so it's been a little more difficult."

Observers advise those who are unemployed and carrying a home mortgage not to fret it — especially if they can prove they're "upside down" on the house, owing more than it's worth.

Loan "modification" became the buzzword last year. That's when borrowers in default try to work out more affordable terms with their lenders.

Homeowners learned to play hardball with banks when

foreclosures surged to more than 31,000 in Clark County. Many of those homeowners walked away from their financial obligations; others sought a reduction in the mortgage balance or deferred payments until their financial situations improve.

Las Vegas attorney Benjamin Childs said loan modification works for someone who bought at the peak of the housing market and obtained a loan with little or no documentation.

"There's a lot of things that go into this," Childs said. "Let's say your income has gone down and your \$400,000 home is now worth \$200,000. The guy's upside down and four months behind. That guy might be just as well having it foreclosed and take a chance with the bank on getting a deficiency judgment."

Many people have come into the attorney's office ready to file for bankruptcy, but Childs warns that they'd better be careful.

"It will resolve their problem, but it might have a residual effect," he said.

Filing bankruptcy is a serious step that could affect credit history and increase the cost of getting loans and credit cards. Also, bankruptcy laws have changed and filing bankruptcy has become more complicated.

Part of President Obama's stimulus package gives bankruptcy judges the right to reform the terms of a mortgage down to current value of the house, not the loan balance, though it hasn't been passed, Childs said.

Another problem for the unemployed is loss of health care benefits. If someone worked for a company with health insurance, he or she can continue coverage under COBRA (Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act) at the full premium, Orgill/Singer President David Dahan said.

Health insurance under

COBRA tends to cost more than health insurance provided for active employees since employers usually pay part of health insurance premiums. For this reason, it can pay to shop around for more affordable individual or family health insurance.

"What they can do is buy short-term, temporary insurance. It's usually not too expensive, \$100 to \$300 a month, depending on age," Dahan said. "The most difficult situation is when somebody can't qualify. They don't have the opportunity to get in a group (plan) because of a medical condition. They don't qualify for short-term (coverage) or an individual policy."

People buying insurance from a private company are advised to check with the Nevada Insurance Commissioners Office at www.doi.state.nv.us to make sure the company is licensed and in good standing.

John McKee, chief executive officer of businessuccesscoach.net, said now may be a good time to consider "going solo."

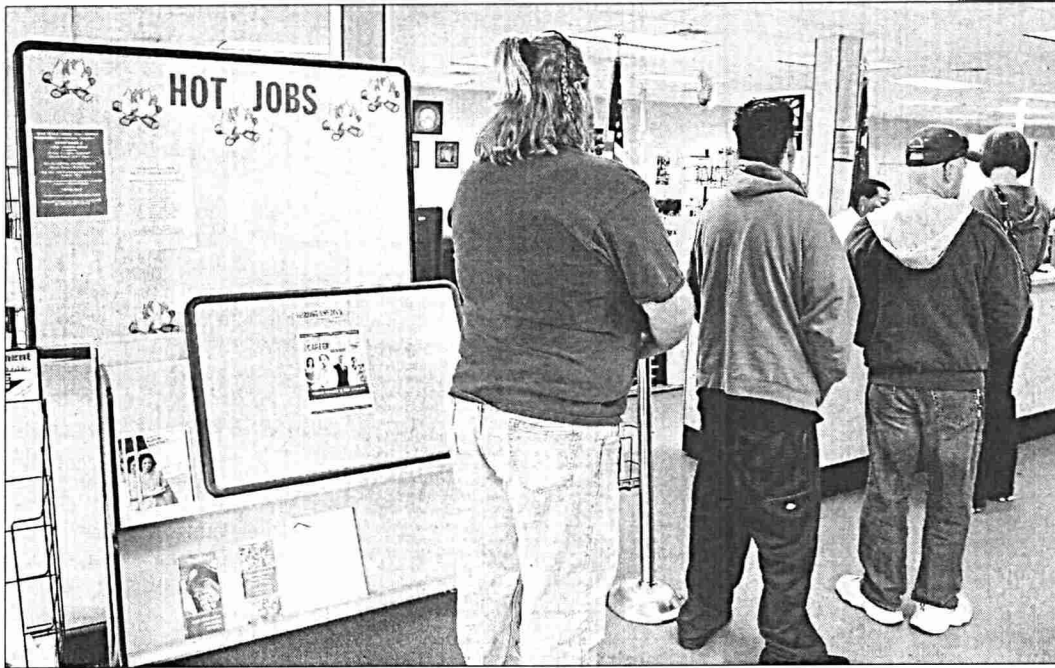
"Given the amount of dramatic changes affecting organizations and businesses across all sectors, it may be extremely difficult and perhaps impossible to replace your job when it's lost," McKee said. "Now is the time to think outside of the box. Services are still required by organizations and individuals alike, and filling those needs as an entrepreneur may be more satisfying than re-entering the work force."

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CRAIG L. MORAN/LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

Job seekers search through reference books Feb. 5 at the Nevada JobConnect office at 119 Water St. in Henderson. Statistics from the Nevada Department of Employment, Training and Rehabilitation show Nevada's unemployment rate hit 9.1 percent during December.



CRAIG L. MORAN/LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

Job seekers line up Feb. 5 at the Nevada JobConnect office at 119 Water St. A Recruiting Nevada official advises job seekers to reach out to friends, relatives and colleagues who may know of job openings.

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ONLINE ADVERTISING DIRECTOR, RECRUITING NEVADA

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