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Residents say city needs more high-paying jobs

By TIERRA PALMER
The Eagle-Gazette Staff
tlpalmer@nncogannett.com

LANCASTER - Steve Norman, 25, has a simple goal: To find a job that pays an honest wage.

The Lancaster resident, who is currently unemployed, said he is willing to do anything provided he makes more than \$8 dollars an hour for a 40-hour workweek.

"I wish there were a lot more good paying jobs," Norman said during a visit to WorkNet, 239 W. Main St., Monday afternoon.

WorkNet is a division of Fairfield County Jobs & Family Services. It helps qualified workers find suitable employment, according to the agency's Web site.

Norman was one of about a dozen people there looking for employment on Monday. But he is not alone in his desire to earn more than minimum wage - now \$6.85 per hour.

"Everyone is looking for something that will sustain their families," said Nida Reid Williamson, a career advisor at WorkNet.

But many say finding a job is not the challenge, finding one that pays well is.

However, Sam Ramsey, 25, of Lancaster, is still optimistic.

Ramsey has a job at a local retailer, which he found through WorkNet. But he hopes to land a more lucrative position in the future.

"I'd like (something) that lets me deal with the general public without being behind a cash register," he said.

That objective prompted Ramsey to pay a return visit to WorkNet, where he used one of the computer workstations to search for a job.

But free access to the Internet is only one of the resources available to job seekers there.

The center also has a copier, a fax machine and a library of reference materials with titles like "Getting the Job You Really Want" and "Resumes That Knock 'em Dead."

Individuals can receive one-on-one career counseling, attend a professional development workshop or look for interview and work-appropriate clothing in the Garment Gallery, according to Workforce Development Supervisor Christy Nichols.

However, the most useful tool for job seekers likely is the WorkNet Web site, detailing those services and about 90 temporary, part-time and full-time openings in Fairfield County. Job positions range from warehouse associate positions to commercial truck drivers.

But some people are not pleased by these employment opportunities. That is because most of the listings are for vacancies in the retail and service industries, often seen as low-wage, dead-end jobs.

"We can't support families on Tim Hortons and Wal-Mart," said Cathy Luster, who worked as a cashier with Big Bear for 32 years before earning a nursing degree in 2005.

Many people are trying to do just that.

The question is can they? The data suggest probably not.

Last year, about 15 million Americans worked in retail, which accounts for 11.6 percent of all employment and 12.4 percent of establishments, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. Most were employed as salespeople, earning an average of \$23,020, slightly above the federal poverty guideline for a family of four.

But retail remains big business in Lancaster.

Ety Pointe Centre will be home to big box retailers Wal-Mart, Menards Home Improvement Center, Kohls, Huntington Bank and a host of restaurants. That development will bring about 1,000 jobs to the area, according to Lancaster Mayor Dave Smith.

"The city doesn't create jobs. (Instead) we try to create an atmosphere that encourages development," he said.

Smith said he believes new businesses will attract new residents, likely resulting in new home construction.
