

Am I Bitter About Pennsylvania's Economy?

I got good news and I got bad news. The good news: according to the Governor's Report on State Performance 2006-2007, employment went up from 5,628,200 in January 2003 to 5,815,200 in November 2007. At the same time unemployment numbers went down from 5.7% in January 2003 to 4.2% in November 2007. The report stated that if Pennsylvania were a nation it would have the 17th largest national economy in the world.

Now the bad news: according to Pennsylvania's Labor and Industry website, Central Pennsylvania's Unemployment rates for February 2008 shows that Lycoming and surrounding counties unemployment rates were higher than the state's average of 4.8%. (Lycoming County came in at 5.8%)

Governor Rendell's report is trying to put a rosy picture into a tattered frame and with the hopes no one would notice. But the American Manufacturing Trade Action Coalition gives us some disturbing numbers in a recent press release. The group says



Richard
James

that economically speaking, Pennsylvania is the 10th worst state in the Union. (In other words, 40 other states did better than Pennsylvania and only nine did worst.)

AMTAC says that Pennsylvania has lost 207,000 manufacturing jobs since 2001. While the governor's report says that our state gained jobs it doesn't say what kind of jobs. AMTAC says that high paying manufacturing jobs were replaced with low wage service jobs. The group says that household incomes have lost purchasing power and that we were making more money (in real dollars) in the year 2000 than we are today.

Senator Barack Obama's famous gaffe about Central PA has inadvertently cast a spotlight on Pennsylvania's economic health. We are forced to ask ourselves, "Just how bad is the local

economy? Are we bitter and frustrated? Would we vote for a Black man as President of the United States?"

Not all Central Pennsylvanians are narrow-minded, embittered, gun-toting, anti-immigration and anti-trade minded religious zealots who desperately cling to their traditions out of frustration with the state's feeble economy. But there may be a kernel of truth hidden in the stereotype.

Pennsylvania is hurting. And it looks like the current downturn of the national and global economies won't make things any easier. Historically, during hard times, people look for someone to blame for their woes. As the economy continues to sour, racial tensions may increase. As we experience more layoffs and plant shutdowns and higher food and fuel prices people will become desperate.

The next President will need a lot of help to bring the country back onto solid financial and economic ground. He or she must have new creative solutions to fix old problems.

But, Pennsylvania is poised to re-

invent itself. Despite the economic slowdown, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has a lot going for it. First there are our coal reserves. Technology to make coal burn cleaner is coming online. We have tons of the stuff just waiting to be used.

Secondly, there's our oil. Yep, we're still pumping minimal amounts of PA crude out of the ground. Because the price of oil has gone up, the old wells in Western Pennsylvania have become profitable to operate again. Oil City, PA is becoming a boomtown once again.

And believe it or not, there is an estimated 50 trillion of cubic feet of natural gas locked in shale deposits deep under our homes and farms. Scores of mining companies are investigating the mineral rights of old land deeds in county courthouses across the state. Some farmers are receiving as much as \$20,000 a month from the drilling firms to extract the gas under their land. It has been reported that oil and gas companies will be investing 700 million dollars this year.

If I were a local politician, I would

be enticing these firms to move their headquarters to centrally located Lycoming County. New energy sources in Pennsylvania will mean more jobs. Our schools and colleges could readjust their curriculums to offer more geological courses for the increased need for skilled labor. The industry's suppliers and vendors would also come to Central Pennsylvania. They will need to fill jobs with local people. Clerks, secretaries, warehouse workers, truckers and salespeople will be needed.

Finally, there are our cornfields and grasslands. Nationally, the agriculture industry is shifting from food production to more fuel production. More farmers will be planting crops to make ethanol, a gasoline additive. Governor Rendell has been pushing for more bio-fuel technology in the state.

We're not bitter and frustrated. We're anxious and eager to move forward. Let's get moving!

James is the publisher of the online newsletter, An African-American Perspective. Visit www.rcjamesdesign.net/African-American
