



Page 7, March 17, 2010

ECONOMY

Health care, maritime offer best hope for jobs

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Health professions and the maritime industry are expected to lead the way in terms of job growth as the economy begins to rebound, panelists said Tuesday.

The panel discussion on job recovery in Hampton Roads, part of the Cox Business Executive Discussion series, drew nearly 250 people to the Norfolk Waterside Marriott.

Jobs have become a hot topic as unemployment climbs. Nationally, the unemployment rate was 9.7 percent in February. In Hampton Roads, it was at 6.9 percent in December, according to the most recent figures available from the Virginia Employment Commission.

Economic stimulus packages promised to create jobs, and Gov. Bob McDonnell won November's election on a campaign pledge of job creation.

The loss of jobs is hitting home in Hampton Roads, which lost an estimated 27,000 jobs over the last two years, based on revised figures, said Vinod Agarwal, an Old Dominion University economics professor.

At the same time, productivity nationally is soaring as employers are able to get more out of

their employees.

That can't be sustained if companies want to remain competitive, he said.

"These guys aren't going to be able to do the same jobs they're currently doing, and you're going to have to hire people," Agarwal said.

The economy is expected to start turning around later this year, Agarwal said. Tidewater Community College projects areas that will need workers include the health field, the maritime industry and modeling and simulation.

The college has seen its modeling and simulation enrollment double this spring, compared to spring 2009, said Deborah DiCroce, the college's president. Emergency medical technician enrollment is up 74 percent, and welding is up 43 percent, she said.

As basic manufacturing jobs disappear, advanced manufacturing — which calls for skilled workers in computers and robotics — can replace it, said Judy Begland, president and CEO of Opportunity Inc., which helps to retrain displaced workers.

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