

Fort Bend leads U.S. counties in job gains

Good schools, housing helping fuel employment, local experts say

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By ERIC HANSON Copyright 2008 Houston Chronicle

RICHMOND — Fueled by thriving energy companies and new hospitals, Fort Bend County had the highest annual percentage increase in employment in the United States last year among the nation's largest counties, according to figures released by the U.S. Department of Labor. Fort Bend led the country with a gain of 7.4 percent in 2007 compared to the previous year. The national figure was 0.8 percent.

Local officials and experts say the increase in the suburban county's robust employment is driven by key factors such as quality housing developments and good schools. "That translates not only into workers for the Houston metro market, but it is also an attraction for employers to locate here," said Jeff Wiley, president of the Greater Fort Bend Economic Development Council.

The Labor Department figures show Harris County was in eighth place with a 3.7 percent increase in employment. No other counties in the Houston region were in the top 10. In terms of raw numbers, Harris County led the nation with an increase of about 73,200 jobs. Harris County Judge Ed Emmett said the figures show the public and private sectors have worked to make sure the region's economy has remained strong.

"While no economy is bulletproof, we in Harris County and Fort Bend County can be grateful that we at least appear to be bullet-resistant," Emmett said. Part of Fort Bend's growth has been linked to the global energy sector, Wiley said. He said companies such as Fluor Corp., an engineering and construction firm, are expanding and adding jobs at its Sugar Land complex.

Also, medical facility construction and expansion has spurred an increase in employment, Wiley said. The Methodist Hospital is building a \$300 million expansion, said hospital spokeswoman Stefanie Asin. The new facility will bring in as many as 600 jobs, she said.

Memorial Hermann Hospital opened a new five-story building in December 2006. And St. Luke's Episcopal Health System will open a 100-bed facility in October, said the system's chief administrative officer, Irene Helsing. Helsing said the Fort Bend area is booming and having a hospital in Sugar Land means that patients can get care close to home without having to drive to the Texas Medical Center.

"Also, oftentimes we may be at capacity for certain services in the Medical Center," she said. Tom Zachman, senior vice president of Fluor's Americas operations, said the company relocated to Sugar Land from the Meyerland area more than 20 years ago.

He said the company is adding jobs to keep pace with the growing energy sector and said by having the company's offices in Sugar Land, it gives employees the chance to live close to the office. "It is really nice to be able to offer people a place to work and place to live that is not so far away," Zachman said. "And that has really helped our recruiting over the last two or three years in attracting people here." Monterey County, Calif., which is home to seaside places such as Pebble Beach and Carmel, was second in job percentage growth with a 5.2 percent increase.

Upscale Williamson County near Nashville, Tenn., was third at 4.5 percent. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor, Fort Bend was first in percentage growth in 2007 compared to 2006 among 328 U.S. counties that contain at least 75,000 employees.

Those counties account for 71.2 percent of the nation's employment. The statistics were obtained from reports submitted by every employer subject to unemployment insurance laws. The 9.1 million employer reports cover 137 million full- and part-time workers in the U.S., according to the Labor Department report.

The figures show Fort Bend County had about 129,000 jobs at the end of 2007 compared with about 120,100 at the end of 2006.

Fort Bend County Judge Bob Hebert said local leaders have been successful in drawing employers to the area but said Houston is what drives the region's economy. "Houston and Harris County are such huge economic engines. If they weren't there, we wouldn't be here," Hebert said.

Hebert said Fort Bend has been able to attract people to relocate because the master-planned communities, such as First Colony and Sienna Plantation, offer a high quality of life with parks, green spaces, landscaping and other amenities.

University of Houston economics professor Barton Smith said the economies of Fort Bend County, and to some extent Montgomery County, are becoming more independent of Houston. Smith said two decades ago thousands of people lived in the new neighborhoods of Sugar Land and Missouri City but almost exclusively worked and spent their money in Harris County.

"Fort Bend County is no longer a bedroom community. You are beginning to develop an economy of your own," Smith said. Bob Stein, professor of political science at Rice University, said housing costs are still low in the region, which helps attract companies and employees. And despite what many commuters may think, Houston traffic moves relatively quickly compared to traffic in other large cities such as Los Angeles or New York, Stein said.

"If you look at congestion times, we are still favorable for a big city," he said. Fort Bend officials acknowledge that most county residents still work in Harris County and will for some time but think that high fuel prices could accelerate employers moving to the suburbs. "We think more companies will look to locate closer to the work force rather than making the work force travel to them," Wiley said.

"I think that bodes well for us in the future."