

Jobs built on federal stimulus slow in coming to Treasure Coast; more projected after new year

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The economic stimulus package was promoted last winter as a \$250 million boost to the Treasure Coast's economy, bringing New Deal-style job relief to thousands hurting from the region's dependence upon the depressed housing market.

So far, the equivalent of 64.5 full-time jobs have been created in the three-county region.

The federal government's Web site — recovery.gov — reported that as of Nov. 23, \$197.46 million has reached Indian, St. Lucie and Martin counties from the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

Local employment officials say the job numbers will grow as the larger projects such as construction of the Indian Street Bridge get under way in the first part of next year, while the current totals are slightly skewed because of reporting requirements.

"Right now a lot of the city and county governments haven't even started their stimulus projects," said Gwenda Thompson, president of Workforce Solutions of the Treasure Coast. "I'm assuming the majority of the hiring will take place after the first of the year."

Through October, Workforce Solutions has reported that jobs had been created for 231 individuals.

The discrepancy in job totals is due to federal reporting guidelines, said Cheryl Miller, the Workforce's chief financial officer.

Many of the local jobs did not begin until June, yet the federal government requires the hours for all stimulus workers to be based upon the overall hours that could have been worked since March 20, 2009, Miller said.

The Workforce numbers are as of late October. The private, nonprofit Florida corporation, which has received \$4.8 million in stimulus dollars to help in training and placing people, is expected to update its monthly stimulus numbers next week.

As for the new workers reported by the federal government, many are percentages of saved jobs, with the money helping to pay salaries of existing workers.

At Treasure Coast Community Health in Fellsmere, six jobs are listed as having been created. However, after stating that an additional dentist was added in July and two others retained, the new positions are described as: 0.6 of a full time dental hygienist, 0.6 of a full-time dental assistant and 0.6 of a full-time receptionist.

The \$15.7 million project to add a lane in each direction in the western part of State Road 70 in St. Lucie County from mile marker 5.9 to 10.2, has created four jobs.

Martin County's ongoing oyster bed restoration efforts in the St. Lucie and Loxahatchee rivers has employed 84 people, from day labor to marine scientists, in the three months since it began, said county Coastal Engineer Kathy Fitzpatrick. However, because they are not all working full time, the total hours come to the equivalent of 15.6 full-time employees, according to recovery.gov.

"You have different people doing different things, they take all of the hours that have been worked and divided them by all the hours in the quarter to come up with how many jobs," Fitzpatrick said. "They're trying to find some way of portraying what is happening that is consistent across all the projects. I don't know if there is any good way of doing it, cause in some ways you're getting something that is consistent but it may not represent what is actually happening on that project."

At the Indian Street Bridge, once expected to create 3,500 jobs but now projected at 2,000, work on the \$72 million structure continues its slow pace.

The bridge — awaiting U.S. District Judge Jose Martinez's ruling if a temporary restraining order should be put in place pending any decisions on Palm City resident Odias Smith's federal lawsuit against the span — has generated just one job: Kevin Stepanick's.

Stepanick sits in a Palm City office building off of Martin Downs Boulevard. His firm has rented the first floor of the building, but at the moment every desk sits empty, except his.

"Oh it's exciting knowing you're the one getting it all together at the beginning," said Stepanick, project administrator for the future Indian Street Bridge that would become a second crossing between Stuart and Palm City.

Over the next few weeks he plans to hire an office staff. But with the bridge still in its design phase, he said the construction jobs may not come together until next spring.

"April, May, possibly earlier, but that's where it sits right now," said Stepanick.

Opponents of the stimulus point to the slow pace of job growth as a sign the strategy's not working.

"I think it's an absolute failure," said U.S. Rep. Tom Rooney, R-Tequesta. "The stimulus was passed under the guise of keeping unemployment under 8 percent. And here we are nationally it's over 10 percent and in Florida and in parts of my district, St. Lucie County, it's north of 15 percent."

The county's jobless rate dropped to 14.7 percent in October, down from 15.3 percent in September, while the Treasure Coast rate stands at 11.2 percent.

Opponents even criticize the government's Web site, redesigned at a cost of \$18 million and fraught with inaccuracies. The Web site includes six fictitious congressional districts in Florida tied to jobs that don't exist.

"They can't even get the simple things right, and we're supposed to have the confidence on how the rest of the stimulus is being spent," said Rooney.

The majority of the 74 Treasure Coast projects listed on recovery.gov — including the big job creators of the Indian Street Bridge in Martin County and the widening of S.R. 70 in St. Lucie County — are stated as having yet to begin or are less than 50 percent complete.

Meanwhile, not all the money previously designated as bound for the Treasure Coast — such as \$600,000 in Pell Grants to students at Hobe Sound Bible School and Fort Pierce Beauty Academy or the \$3.5 million for the Treasure Coast wide Neighborhood Stabilization Programs — is directly listed as landing in the Treasure Coast on the Web site that was designed to showcase the effectiveness of the recovery act.

Martin County oyster restoration efforts can be found as separate projects on the site, once with the full \$4,024,969 price tag, and again as a \$4,019,087 CSA International project. CSA International is the county's subcontractor on the project.

Also one project pinpointed in St. Lucie County on recovery.gov is for money heading to Leon County — \$104,800 through an AmeriCorps Recovery Grant for Tallahassee Community College.

Bryan Garner of WPTV NewsChannel 5 contributed to this report.