

Top employers report workforce looking strong

Things are looking bright in Butler County's future

By Staff Report

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Big news continues to pour out of Butler County's top employers, boding well for the strength and recovery of the local workforce in 2010.

Miami University

Butler County's largest university has had to make some tough decisions in order to remain ahead in recessionary times.

Miami officials announced they will be working to cut an additional \$5 million from the budget after fall enrollment fell 350 students short of target goals. Staff layoffs also loom, according to President David Hodge.

"Under normal circumstances we would use our reserves to manage the financial shortfall, but these are not normal circumstances," Hodge wrote in a letter to staff. "The continuing deep economic distress has left us, like almost all colleges and universities, with few readily available reserves."

Despite these budgetary concerns, the university will undergo a major overhaul of its residence halls, bringing the promise of construction jobs in the future.

Behind the national average of space per bed at 170 square feet per bed at 70 percent, Miami officials said their master plan for the halls would span 45 projects during 20 years.

It calls for the renovation of most buildings and includes the possibility of building at least one new one. University architect Robert Keller said details will be available at the board of trustees subcommittee on finance meeting in April.

AK Steel Corp.

While more than 300 workers at AK Steel's Middletown Works facility were on layoff in 2009, the company has soundly rebounded this year and has undergone additional hiring according to Scott Rich, president of the Machinists Local Lodge 1943, which represents hourly workers.

"At least 70 positions have been hired since the first of the year," he said.

Bill Triick, president of the Chamber of Commerce serving Middletown, Monroe and Trenton, called the AK Steel plant "vital" to the business community in Butler County.

A project that has been languishing in permit processes, appeals and lawsuits for more than two

years — SunCoke Energy — has finally received a New Source Review air permit from the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency to begin construction.

The estimated \$360 million-coke oven facility will eventually supply coke — a vital steelmaking raw material — and energy to AK Steel. Beyond the 500 temporary jobs the project will bring over its 15- to 18- month construction berth, it also promised at least 75 permanent plant jobs once complete.

“It’s just the sort of security Middletown and the area’s steelmaking industry needs to maintain manufacturing for years to come,” Triick said. “This guarantees continued steelmaking in Middletown for at least 20 years. It’s good news for the industry.”

Once the SunCoke project is completed, AK Steel will be receiving more than one million tons of coke annual from that company through contracts with the new Middletown plant and an existing facility in Franklin Furnace, Ohio.

AK Steel spokesman Alan McCoy declined to speak on specifics of what the company will do with such a hefty supply of coke, but Rich said he has been assured by the company there are no current plans to cease the coke making operations at Middletown Works.

Cincinnati Financial

After some losses last year due to drops in its investment portfolio, Cincinnati Financial has forged ahead to profitability with its eye on further expansion.

New business raked in \$405 million in the property casualty market last year, and Kenneth Stecher, CEO of the Fairfield-based insurer, said the company will continue its expansion strategy by adding new agencies in the Colorado, Wyoming and Texas markets.

Cincinnati Financial is targeting to grow by 65 new agencies in 2010, the same goal it had last year.

“We are always researching new states and agencies to represent us,” he said.

The company also will be expanding its personal insurance lines in those states, as it typically opens with commercial lines first to build relationships in the state, according to officials.

It’s also added to its Fairfield headquarters a workers’ compensation claim reporting center.

“The center is meant to improve response time and help policyholders act quickly to limit losses,” Stecher said.

By diversifying its exposure geographically and managing its catastrophe risk, which was minimal in the fourth quarter, Stecher said that according to the insurer it is well-positioned as marketplace conditions improve.

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