17,100 fewer working here than in 2000

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(December 2006) — New statistics show that the number of local people who have jobs or are actively seeking them continues to decline.

The labor force in the five-county Rochester area stood at 520,900 in December, down from 531,000 five years earlier, according to the data released Thursday by the state Labor Department.

Experts say part of the reason is that frustrated job hunters are leaving the area for better prospects.

The latest U.S. census figures bolster that point. They show that New York state lost 26,000 residents from July 2004 to July 2005. The only other states to see a drop in population were Massachusetts and Rhode Island. The District of Columbia also experienced a decline.

The federal statistics, which were released earlier this month, do not indicate how many people left the Rochester area, but Kent Gardner, president and chief economist of the Center for Governmental Research, suspects that Monroe County is losing its fair share.

"I would speculate, with employment lagging behind the rest of the country, we are probably losing population as well," he said. "We are losing jobs when other states are gaining jobs. We are losing jobs when other places in the state are gaining jobs."

The Labor Department said Thursday that the number of people with jobs in the five-county area — which includes Monroe, Orleans, Livingston, Ontario and Wayne counties — fell to 496,000 in December, a drop of 2,100 from the previous year.

The jobless rate ticked down to 4.8 percent in December 2005 — a drop from the 5.1 percent posted in December 2004. That represents 24,900 unemployed people, which was a year-over-year drop of 2,000 people, according to the state data.

Looking for work

The stagnant job market is not a revelation to Linda Dworaczyk, 45, of Brighton. Her job at Eastman Kodak Co. was eliminated in December; she had worked for the company for 18 years. Also in December, Dworaczyk's boyfriend, John Alfano, 46, lost his job at Pacific Co. in Canandaigua. "I think we could be lucky and both get jobs here because we both have master's degrees and a lot of stuff going for us," Dworaczyk said. "But when you look outside the area you can find billions of jobs paying much more. And here, there is one here or two there."

One unscientific indication of residents leaving the area is the number of moving vans coming into the county compared with the number leaving. United Van Lines, a moving company with 30 percent of the business nationwide, moved 742 households out of Monroe County in 2005 and 360 into the county, according to its annual migration report. The top destinations were Florida and California.

The census figures show Florida gained the most residents in the nation: 404,000. Texas was second with 398,000. With a 3.5 percent growth rate, Nevada was the fastest-growing state, adding 82,000 residents.

Laura Wilson, 36, grew up in the Rochester area and has left twice in the past 10 years because of corporate downsizing and the effect of the local economy on her job. She now works at The New England Journal of Medicine in Waltham, Mass.

"I really love the job I have right now, and I have met some really wonderful people here, but I do miss being able to see my parents regularly, as well as the affordability of housing in Rochester," Wilson said.

She said she is hesitant to return to Rochester "for a job that could be eliminated in a moment's notice."

Why we're losing jobs

The Business Council blames both New York's population loss and job loss on the state's high taxes. The Public Policy Institute of New York State, the Business Council's research arm, determined in a recent study that New York's state and local tax burden was the highest in the nation at $4,645 per person. The per-capita tax burdens in Texas and Florida were about $2,000 less.

"New York state has a lot of charms, but it's naive to think other states don't have their own charms," said Business Council spokesman Matthew Maguire. "New York has been making that naive mistake for too long, and our population numbers prove it."

In a recent Cornell University Survey Research Institute poll, 25 percent of respondents considered employment the state's biggest concern. The second biggest concern, at 17 percent, was taxes.

Jeffrey Marcus, who runs the networking group PeerNet, said there are people in the community who are desperately trying to find work here so they don't have to uproot their families. But they can only hang on for so long before finances force them to look elsewhere, he said.

"I know people who have tried for a really long time and really hard to stay, sometimes to the detriment of their careers," Marcus said.

Quality of life a plus

Then there are those who want to return to the Rochester area to be close to family or because of the quality of life.
Tim Inthirakoth grew up in Rochester and moved to Boston after graduating from Alfred University last year. He works in marketing and public relations for a private company there but wants to return home to work or attend graduate school.

"The quality of life is higher in Rochester. In Boston, you spend half your day commuting," he said. "Bigger is not better."

Dana Denberg, 35, moved to Greece from Los Angeles 14 months ago with her husband, Adam, and their 2-year-old daughter. It was a planned move, and it took Adam, 34, more than a year to find an accounting job in the area.

But Denberg said the long job search was worth the time because she can be closer to her parents in Lockport, Niagara County. The Denbergs also were able to build a bigger house with a large back yard.

"We built a house twice the size of (our) home in Los Angeles at half the cost, and the public schools are better than where our daughter would have gone to school," Denberg said. "A lot of friends I grew up with have asked me if I was sure I wanted to come back, but we looked at it as an investment in our quality of life."

Includes reporting by The Associated Press.