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Revenue and job growth point to healthy Tomball economy

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New retail chains and health care jobs are contributing factors

By Emily Roberts

With sales tax revenue increasing and many of the city's top employers hiring and adding new jobs, Tomball's economy is the strongest it has been since the recession hit in 2008. Tomball's economic recovery is reflective of the recovery throughout the Greater Houston area. "Of all the nation's 20 largest metropolitan areas in the country, Houston and Washington D.C. were the last to enter the recession and Houston's been the first to come out," said Patrick Jankowski, vice president of research for the Greater Houston Partnership. Jankowski said Houston's recovery is in large part because of the strength of the oil and gas industry, the stability of the housing market, and population growth—which has in turn increased the need for health care services. In Tomball, three of the five top employers fall into the thriving oil and gas and health care industries. "If you look at Tomball employers, you're

really looking at Baker Hughes, the hospital and the school district," said Kelly Violette, executive director of the Tomball Economic Development Corporation.

Job growth

One sector that never lost jobs during the recession was the health care industry, according to Jankowski. "There are two main factors influencing the growth in health care—65,000 people are born in this region every year, and the population over 65 grows by 15,000 people every year," Jankowski said. "As people age, they [use] a lot more health care, and people are living longer." Tomball Regional Medical Center is Tomball's second-largest employer with approximately 1,100 employees, and there

is an ongoing need for more health care workers. "As the 'baby boomer' generation ages and utilizes health care

services to a greater degree, TRMC will also be growing to support their health care needs,” CEO Bud- Wethington said. “We have implemented a Senior Circle program specifically geared toward senior health and wellness.”

TRMC has 40 open positions, most of which fall under the nursing category. “As with every hospital, we work to

recruit and retain talented and skilled individuals and adjust positions to the needs of patient demand,” Wethington said. In hiring its nurses, TRMC has a strong relationship with Lone Star College–Tomball. Many of the nursing graduates go on to work at the hospital. LSC–Tomball’s nursing program has 118 students and will accept an additional 60 in the fall. “The nursing programs are currently at capacity and have been for many years,” said Nicole Finkbeiner, executive director of college relations. “We are currently looking for ways to expand the

number of students in our nursing programs by exploring additional options for clinical sites.” Overall, the college has experienced a 20 percent growth in students from fall 2009 to fall 2011, in part because of the growth of

returning adult students. “Unemployed and underemployed workers in the area are turning to their community college to update their skills or for training in new fields to help them re-enter the workforce,” said Susan Karr, president of LSC-Tomball. “Others are attending LSC-Tomball to obtain professional certification in high-demand fields like veterinary medicine, residential/commercial electrical and computer networking technology.” To keep up with its growing student population, the city’s fourth largest employer held an adjunct job fair April 28 to find additional part-time faculty. The college accepted applications for teachers in a variety of disciplines including

arts, English, drama, math, physics, psychology and Spanish. Education jobs are also available at Tomball ISD—the city’s largest employer—which is adding 49 employees. Many of the positions are available because of the opening of Timber Creek Elementary School in August. The district will also be adding another grade level

at Tomball Memorial High School in the fall prompting additional staffing needs, said Superintendent John Neubauer. “Plus, we have experienced an approximate three to four percent enrollment growth each school

year,” Neubauer said “It is necessary to plan ahead to make sure we have the highest quality teaching

staff for our students.” Also hiring additional employees is Tomball’s third-largest employer, Baker Hughes Pressure Pumping Technology Center, formerly known as BJ Services. The global oil company headquartered

in Houston continues to thrive because of the high price of oil and technological innovations that have made it economically viable to drill in previously untapped reserves and formations like the Eagle Ford Shale. “When you look at the different sectors, the oil and gas industry lost the least amount of jobs and was one of the very first to recover its jobs, and that’s because of the proliferation of hydraulic fracturing in places like the Eagle Ford Shale,” Jankowski said.

Retail and revenue

As Tomball’s major industries flourish, sales tax revenue is hitting an all-time high. Combined sales tax revenue for January and February 2012 is up 27 percent when compared to the same time frame in 2011, and 30 percent, when compared to 2010. “When you look at new stores in the last six months, Kohl’s and Marshalls have opened, there’s been several restaurants that have opened and a couple more are set to open soon,” City Manager George Shackelford said. “There’s also a lot of construction going on and retail business is starting to pick up considerably, which is good.” A number of new chain stores are joining Kohl’s in Tomball Marketplace, which previously had only one anchor tenant—Academy Sporting Goods. In March, Styles for Less and Famous Footwear opened and in the summer, Ross Dress for Less, Lane Bryant and The Children’s Place will fill out the center. “It says a lot about our community that we have enough primary employers and households to

attract the retail chains we’re finally getting now,” Violette said. The retail chains are expected to bring 300 jobs and \$360,000 in sales tax revenue to the city, though those are both conservative estimates, Violette said. “The

economic impact is really huge—we're going to capture a lot of that retail [spending] that has had to go elsewhere for more variety," she said. With all the changes happening in the city, Tomball Chamber president Bruce Hillegeist said he has noticed a paradigm shift in the way people from outside the city respond to him when he mentions he is from Tomball. "People are positive in their responses about Tomball—they say, 'I know where Tomball is, I want to live there,'" Hillegeist said. "Tomball is becoming known for small and large businesses and events. It seems like it's getting more attention these days, and it's well-deserved."