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Low wages send workers out of county

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OCALA - According to the 2000 U.S. Census, more than 13,000 people leave Marion County daily to work, while more than 9,000 migrate into the area each day to earn a paycheck.

It was a statistic used on Wednesday by Rusty Skinner, executive vice president of CLM Workforce Connection, in a presentation to business leaders on the board of the Ocala/Marion County Economic Development Corp. in an effort to start a dialogue about recruitment efforts for local firms.

While there is still a gap of 4,000 more people leaving the area to work every day than coming in, Skinner said the number almost mirrors the June 2004 unemployment rate of 4.3 percent.

Competitive wages also factor in when compared to other regions. Figures from Florida Labor Market Information reports the median wage for registered nurses is \$28,700 in Ocala compared to \$29,200 in Gainesville and \$39,800 in Jacksonville.

Skinner rhetorically asked the group for their vision of the area's labor market and the recruitment pool.

"We are no longer competing with our neighbors or statewide to draw talent, it goes much wider than that," he said.

The 2000 figures show that most of the out-migration employment from 1995 to 2000 was largely to Alachua County, with 1,669 people, followed by 1,647 people making the trek to the Tampa Bay area, which includes Tampa, Clearwater and St. Petersburg.

Skinner pointed to synergies in other areas like theme parks in Orlando, and NFL teams in Jacksonville and Tampa, which help to attract companies and increase employment.

"Where are we, is the question," Skinner said. "We need to get aggressive and look at what we need to do to pull talent here."

While Skinner said CLM Workforce Connection brought professional recruitment staff on board a year and a half ago, it's now time to begin collaborating with other employers to bolster recruitment efforts. Selling the facts about the area's housing costs, commute time and other positives he believes will help.

"If we don't we are going to be passed by, and that is what frustrates me," said Skinner, who commutes from Jacksonville to Ocala daily.

He used the local medical industry's need for physicians as an example of ways the local business community can collaborate. Recommendations from Skinner included offering incentives to physicians setting up practices in the area along with spousal employment referrals.

Dyer Michell, CEO of Munroe Regional Medical Center and former EDC chairman, supports recommendations from CLM Workforce Connection. Talking to the same group in June about the need for physicians, Michell said the incentives can be expanded to a lot of medical sub-speciality areas and holds true to attract executives.

"The medical society, business community . . . we all need to sit and talk about what we need to do to attract

people here," he said.

In coming weeks, Skinner plans to take the same message on the road to the Ocala Human Resource Managers Association and hopes to bring business leaders across the community together to develop a strategy.

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