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Akron posts strong figures

City economy fares well in comparison with other Ohio cities

By Marilyn Miller
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Deborah Eisinger describes her company as ``growing."

HomeSense Enterprises, the company she and her inventor husband, Lee, started in 2004, makes sensor devices.

The Akron natives developed and marketed a motion sensor that automatically shuts off an electric stove if the cook is away from it too long.

It is primarily used by the elderly, those with mental health issues or mentally handicapped individuals who live alone and want to maintain their independence.

HomeSense is one of the local companies contributing to Akron having the best economic forecast compared with other major cities in Ohio.

According to the Ohio Labor Market Review, a monthly publication of the Ohio Department of Job & Family Services, recent leading indicators, which are designed to predict changes in employment, show Akron's short-term future is more promising than any other Ohio city's.

The leading indicators are based on unemployment claims, building permits, inventory changes and money supply.

Larry Less, an analyst in work force research for the Department of Job & Family Services, said the indicators are used to forecast employment trends by studying employment (excluding agriculture) and seasonally adjusted job statistics over three to six months.

Less said the index is based on growth and decline in employment levels pegged to figures from the year 2000. A number smaller than 100 means the economy has not surpassed the 2000 employment level. If the number is greater than 100, the economy is improving.

Akron had a leading indicator of 104.0 in August, followed by Cincinnati with 103.5, Columbus with 102.2, Toledo with 97.0, Youngstown-Warren-Boardman with 96.2, Canton-Massillon with 94.9, Cleveland-Elyria-Mentor with 94.3 and Dayton with 94.2.

``When you look at employment in Akron, the trend has been more upward in the last few years, but at a slow rate," said Less. ``But there's not much of a change for the entire state, which is also consistent over recent years."

He said the Canton-Massillon area has lost employment in durable goods, such as manufacturing of appliances and autos, areas where recovery has been harder to achieve.

Akron has employment in more nondurable goods industries, such as plastics.

Less said employment starts picking up in September and October and peaks in November with retail hiring for the holidays. ``Expecting employment to increase in the fall is not a big surge outside of the normal. Seeing a decline in employment in January and February and again in the summer months when teachers are a factor, also doesn't reveal much."

Economic analyst Ken Mayland of Clearview Economics in Pepper Pike agreed that there is a positive showing of leading indicators in Akron and other cities, but says it is not translating into more jobs.

``Ohio is down in goods productions, manufacturing jobs such as auto industry layoffs," Mayland said. ``Ohio continues to lag the progress seen by the rest of the country."

Economist Ryan Bucher of Kent State University's Stark Campus said that in a recent survey, he discovered there are many entry-level positions available with financial institutions, such as banks or insurance companies seeking workers with little or no experience in financial matters.

The Department of Job & Family Services cites statistics indicating that throughout Ohio, employment in educational and health services increased as well as jobs in the areas of leisure and hospitality, professional and business services, construction and government.

Employment in manufacturing dropped. Decreases were also noted in trade, transportation, utilities, information and natural resources and mining.

Deborah Eisinger, who is the president of HomeSense, said her company is small and only has three full-time employees.

``We just received the SBIR (Small Business Innovation Research) grant for \$850,000 to expand our product," Eisinger said, excited about the newest development for the company.

The small electrical device, which sells for \$300, attaches to a stove and can be installed without having to purchase new appliances.

The sensor device automatically disconnects the stove if the cook does not return within eight minutes of turning on a burner. An audible alert goes off after six minutes if no one is within the sensor's vision, then gives warning sounds the last two minutes.

The SBIR grant is to research and develop a similar device for the gas stove.

The company is also working on automatic shut-offs for small appliances, such as the coffee pot, curling iron and space heaters.

If those production plans succeed, the company will expand to add two or three additional full-time positions, Eisinger said.

Unlike other companies putting out a product, Eisinger said, the company doesn't have a manufacturing warehouse.

``We don't own one. We think it's a waste of money for us when there are already so many manufacturers who have a building and equipment in the area and who need the work," she said. ``Our primary concern is not to go out of the country to outsource. It's real important to us to support our own manufacturers here in Northeast Ohio. We are dealing with a safety product and we need to be close to the product."

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