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## Nevada jobless rate up again

### At 7.6 percent, it's highest statewide level in 23 years

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"Ho ho ho?"

Nope. Not this year.

More like, "Boo hoo hoo."

That's the sad jingle set to peal across the Silver State through the holidays, as Nevadans hunting for seasonal work run smack into the state's new 7.6 percent unemployment rate.

That October rate, which the Nevada Department of Employment, Training and Rehabilitation unveiled Friday, showed a 0.3 percentage-point gain from September's jobless level. It was 2.5 percentage points higher than unemployment in Nevada a year earlier, and the highest statewide jobless level since May 1985. It also beat the nation's October jobless rate by 1.1 percentage points.

Nevada's unemployment has surpassed the national average every month since mid-2007.

The share of unemployed Las Vegans reached 7.5 percent in October, up 0.2 of a percentage point from September and up 2.5 percentage points from a year ago.

In Reno-Sparks, 7.2 percent of the workforce lacked jobs last month, up from 6.8 percent in September and 4.4 percent in October 2007.

Several key industries posted some of the biggest job losses. Construction shed 15,000 jobs, or 11.3 percent, of its statewide labor force year over year in October, with 8,700 of those lost positions located in Las Vegas. Nevada's hotel-casinos dropped roughly 2,300 positions, or 1.1 percent of their employees, including 600 positions in Las Vegas.

Bill Anderson, the employment department's chief economist, blamed rising unemployment on sluggish activity in housing, commercial development and consumer spending.

Bill Werksman, managing partner at Resource Partners in Las Vegas, also faulted the nation's credit crunch. Lending to businesses dried up in September after several high-profile bank failures, and job queries to Werksman's placement firm have jumped as much as 10 percent since. Companies simply can't borrow these days to sustain all operations, let alone expand.

"Businesses are really taking a critical look at the functionality of each employee across the board,

and making sure people are absolutely essential to the business mission," Werksman said.

Added Jennifer DeHaven, executive vice president of Millenium Staffing Services in Las Vegas: "It's definitely more of a challenge to find a position in your field of interest than it was a year ago. People are expanding the repertoire of positions they will accept."

Nor can locals expect robust holiday hiring to vanquish the employment doldrums.

The employment department forecasts a 2.6 percent gain, or 3,670 jobs, in retail employment through December. That's worse than hiring even after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, when the state's retailers expanded their seasonal work forces by 2.9 percent.

Retailers added 4,600 new jobs, or about 3.3 percent, during 2007's holiday-hiring season.

"Projections for holiday spending are less than positive, which means retailers will be more cautious in padding their staffs," Anderson said. "With the highest unemployment rate we've seen this decade, competition for those 3,600 (retail) jobs will be extremely fierce."

The economy isn't punishing all sectors or disciplines equally. As operations in construction, mining and gaming struggle to stay staffed, employers in government, education, health care and information technology have added positions.

Government employment grew healthily in October, adding 5,800 jobs for a 3.6 percent gain in statewide work force and a 5.7 percent increase in Las Vegas. Education and health care, which the employment department combines into one category, added 3.5 percent, or 3,300 jobs, to the labor force statewide, and 4.3 percent, or 2,800 jobs, in Las Vegas. The state's information-technology base grew 0.6 percent, or 100 jobs -- all of those new positions in Las Vegas.

Southern Nevada never has enough information-technology experts to meet the area's hiring needs, Werksman said, so IT ranks as a perennially strong field. DeHaven cited customer service and collections as two relatively solid areas for hiring today.

Across all industries, the feeblest demand for new workers comes in marketing and human resources, Werksman said. That's because those arenas typically don't generate revenue directly, so managers often believe they can most afford the cutting.

Experts disagree on when job creation might recover.

The employment department predicted Friday that job loss will continue to rise through 2009, peaking at 8.8 percent in the fourth quarter.

But DeHaven said Las Vegas could receive a mild employment assist in January, when the convention season begins in earnest.

Plus, Werksman said he expects the federal government to assemble stimulus programs to reverse employment declines.

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