

# The Star-Ledger

## Employment should be Job 1

Monday, May 05, 2008

Private-sector job creation in New Jersey last year was -- to be blunt -- dismal. There's no way to put a positive spin on these numbers. If the state doesn't engage in some long-term planning to grow its economy, the numbers in future years aren't likely to be any better.

The increase in private jobs in neighboring states was significantly higher than in New Jersey. In real numbers, New Jersey added 3,700 private-sector jobs, which translates to a .01 percent increase. New York's rate was 12 times higher, Connecticut's eight times higher and Pennsylvania's six times higher.

Even states with smaller work forces outperformed New Jersey in real numbers: Massachusetts had 2.8 million private-sector jobs in December 2006 and added 21,200 to that by last December. Connecticut added 11,900 to its 1.4 million jobs. New Jersey, by contrast, had 4.3 million private jobs in December 2006 and added that puny 3,700.

In the past seven-plus years -- from December 2000 to March 2008 -- private-sector jobs in New Jersey actually dropped by 6,700. Government was responsible for all job growth. Payrolls for state and local governments increased by 55,800 during that period.

The accuracy of the numbers can't be disputed. They come from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and were crunched by Rutgers professors Joseph Seneca and James Hughes.

It wasn't always like this. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the state engaged in strategic planning to identify emerging technologies and establish an infrastructure that served those needs. As a result, New Jersey was a leader during those years.

Since 1985, the state has had a science and technology commission to promote commercialization of technology, and Gov. Jon Corzine has both an office and a council on economic growth.

Recently, the Corzine administration has been scoring some small successes in luring businesses or getting those here to expand.

But it will take considerably more to make New Jersey an economic powerhouse again.

One problem is an inability to escape politics. The failed stem cell bond issue is an example. Stem cell research is an area of future growth, but politicians botched the opportunity. What started out as a reasonable \$230 million bond issue to help jump-start research at a single facility in New Brunswick ballooned into a \$450 million proposal guided more by political decisions -- making sure four different regions got a share -- than what was good for the state. If the future is to be promising, politicians and their allies need to make the state's welfare -- not their own -- paramount.

Trenton has to consider ways of making the state more business-friendly without abandoning appropriate consumer protections and without handing companies a gaggle of government grants and tax breaks.

If New Jersey is to once again be the economic engine of the region rather than the caboose, the state's leaders need to pay attention to those dismal job figures and get serious about improving them.