

Windsor unemployment rate drops to 5.1 per cent, lowest since 2001



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The Windsor riverfront is seen in this September 2006 photo. WINDSOR STAR

The Windsor area has matched its record low monthly unemployment rate after February's figure

dropped 0.3 per cent to 5.1, according to numbers released Friday by Statistics Canada.

The last time the rate was this low was in 2001.

The drop left the Windsor area tied for the sixth lowest unemployment rate in the nation.

"It's great news for the Windsor area," said Matt Marchand, president and CEO of the Windsor-Essex Regional Chamber of Commerce.

"It's been a wonderful turnaround looking at where we were in 2008-09."

Windsor's unemployment rate was 15.7 per cent in July 2009 and has plummeted 10.6 per cent in just over seven years.

The national unemployment rate in February was 6.6 per cent while Ontario's rate is 6.2 per cent.

The national figure is the lowest it has been in two years after the economy added 15,300 jobs last month.

Brantford enjoyed the lowest unemployment rate in Canada last month at 4.2 per cent.

Stephen MacKenzie, CEO of the WindsorEssex Economic Development Corporation, suspects the numbers for the entirety of Essex County are even better.

The Statistics Canada figures don't include the towns of Leamington, Essex and Kingsville.

"We haven't got those numbers yet, so countywide I think we may be below 5.0," MacKenzie said. "We're very pleased with the trend. Companies are definitely hiring."

MacKenzie said the Windsor area is benefiting from its two largest sectors, auto and agricultural, enjoying solid growth.

"It's generally accepted the catalyst for driving down the numbers was FCA investing in the minivan plant," MacKenzie said of Fiat Chrysler Automobiles.

"Manufacturing jobs create more manufacturing jobs. Those jobs beget jobs in other areas."

MacKenzie said the declining unemployment rate is fuelling growth in other areas of the economy.

“When people are working and creating wealth, you are attractive to people from outside the region,” MacKenzie said.

“There are people bidding for homes.

“Home starts this year are double what they were last year in Windsor Essex. The building permits reported so far are higher than last year.

“There are lots of positives.”

MacKenzie also credits the lower dollar for helping pump up commerce.

The lower dollar is keeping more cross-border shoppers home and drawing tourists.

It’s also a huge boost to the tool and die and mould-making industries in the area.

“We’re blessed with companies making high-tech products and it’s making their products all the more attractive,” MacKenzie said.

Heather Gregg, manager of employer engagement for Workforce WindsorEssex, said surveys of employers show optimism is widespread.

“Seventy per cent of the employers who responded (to a December survey) said they planned to hire within the next three months,” Gregg said. “That would cover this period.”

Gregg said the intention to hire spanned the entire employment spectrum.

In addition to the usual need for skilled trades, there’s a demand for health care, administrative and hospitality workers.

“It’s a range of industries and skill levels,” Gregg said. “It’s from entry level to managers.”

Gregg said what’s also encouraging is most employers are searching for workers exclusively within Essex County.

Sixty-three per cent of employers surveyed said they are searching locally only. Employers’ views of the local workforce are also more positive.

“The perspective is shifting toward viewing the workforce as good to excellent,” Gregg said. “The percentage of poor perspectives has decreased.”

However, the employment picture isn’t all rosy.

The rate of participation in the labour force dropped by 0.7 in February to 59.9 per cent. That’s well below the national average of 65.8 per cent.

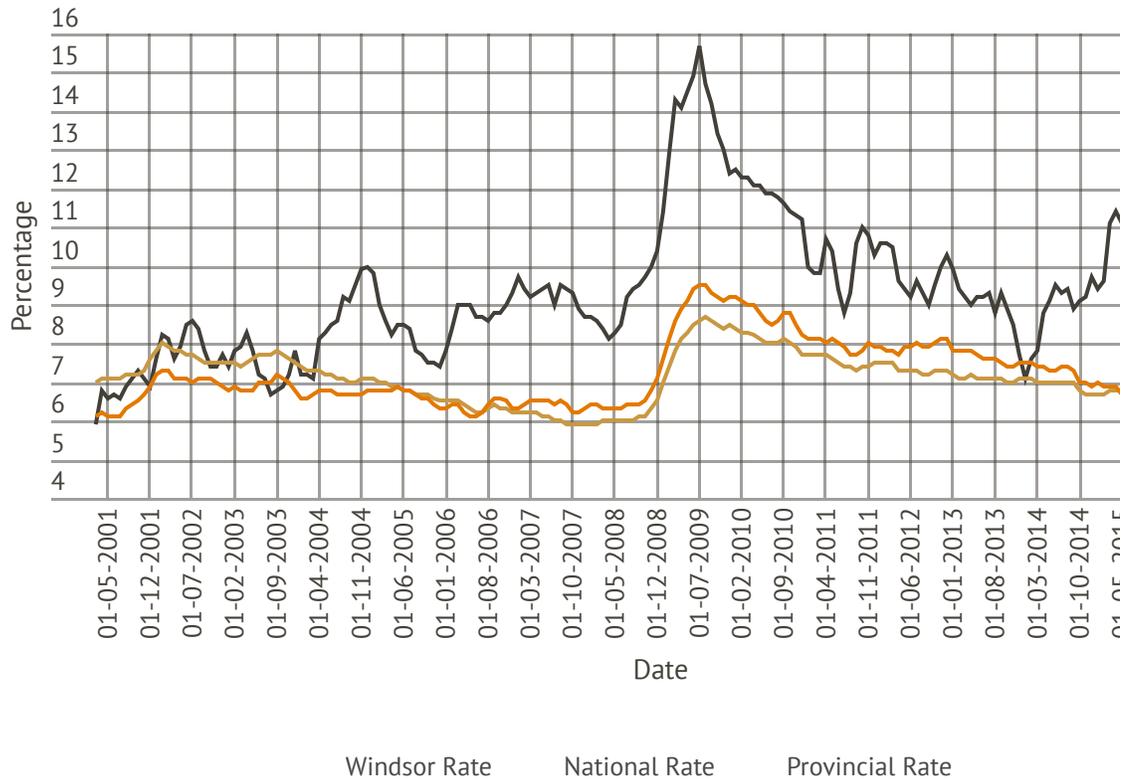
“The United Way has pointed out we have a poverty problem in this community,” Marchand said.

“We know there are people being left behind even though the unemployment rate is dropping.

“We have jobs without people and people without jobs. We have to address that.”

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