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Cutback in jobs felt in Camden

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One third of Camden's work force could be on the unemployment line less than a month from now, but it wouldn't be the first time the city has lost jobs with livable wages.

Such jobs sustain what small bit of the middle class remains in the city.

Everything from soup to ships was once made here, sustaining a booming manufacturing city with a vibrant downtown and sprawling neighborhoods filled with the working and middle class.

Then for any number of reasons, industry left, leaving a fraction of those jobs, held largely by workers from outside Camden.

A loss of 383 city positions targeted for layoff to close a \$26.5 million budget gap -- whether held by city residents or not -- would be a blow to the local economy, said Jack Worrall, who chairs the economics department at Rutgers-Camden.

"Many of the jobs supporting middle-class lives have spillover effects," Worrall said. "People who live in the city spend money in the city. The spending creates and supports other jobs."

It's a scenario Camden has seen before. Major employers long gone -- such as RCA, General Electric and most of Campbell Soup Co. -- represented quality jobs whose loss Worrall said led not only to a direct reduction in the city's middle class, but the decline of small businesses throughout the city.

"Even if the job holders did not live in the city, they probably spent in the city and helped its economy," Worrall said.

According to 2008 figures from CamConnect, only one-fifth of employed Camden residents work within the city limits. Nearly half of them work in its downtown area. Half of the employed Camden residents work outside the county.

Based on figures from the U.S. Census Bureau and the Greater Camden Partnership, for every one job held by a resident in downtown Camden, there are six held by nonresidents. A little more than 1,900 workers make less than \$14,399 per year. About 4,300 make \$14,400 to \$40,800 per year.

The largest section of downtown workers earns more than \$40,800 a year. They number upward of 13,300.

The largest field of employment remains in the health care and social assistance sector. Cooper University Hospital employs about 4,100 people, making it the city's largest employer, followed by Our Lady of Lourdes Medical Center, with 2,500 workers.

By comparison, Camden City puts only about 1,100 people to work, placing it on par with government contractor L-3 Communications, the city's fifth-largest employer.

In 2009, City Council adopted an ordinance that requires candidates for public jobs to live in the city before taking a Civil Service test. City firefighters and police officers may reside wherever they wish once employed.

The residency requirement is permanent for other Camden employees, with exceptions for those with professional licenses.

The rationale for the requirement included establishing and maintaining a taxpayer base as well as providing job opportunities for locals.

Some residents have been critical that money has flowed freely to develop educational and medical facilities and the city's waterfront, but little has been done to improve severely blighted neighborhoods.

These days, abandoned properties are few and far between in areas directly surrounding Cooper Hospital.

Lorsley Boogaard, an executive assistant, has been living in the shadow of the downtown hospital for 15 years. The neighborhood she settled into with her teacher husband was drastically different than the one she lives in now -- for the better.

It's one of Camden's rare success stories.

"I've seen this area come a long, long way," Boogaard said. "When I first moved here, abandoned buildings pockmarked the area. Washington Street was nothing but abandoned buildings."

Now a lot around the corner once filled with tires and debris is a community garden, and police regularly roll by.

"There have been investments made here like you wouldn't believe," Boogaard enthused. "We have the new medical school going up. You think the police presence is going to leave? I don't think so."

As with most city blocks in Camden, abandoned structures with plywood tagged "Department of Public Works" covering doors and windows are on Boogaard's street. They seem to blend in with the rest of the rowhomes, awaiting an investor or an ambitious buyer to turn the properties around.

"A lot of people in this neighborhood feel they're not going to snatch the police presence around here, not if Cooper Hospital has anything to say about it," Boogaard said. "My concern is with those residents on the outsides of Cooper Plaza where the revitalization isn't going so great."

A few blocks away and in contrast with much of Camden, Cooper Grant is in the middle of a small housing boom. It has long been one of the most stable sections of town.

Bryon Yoder was quick to buy up one of 18 new townhomes completed in 2008. Before they were built and despite Camden's reputation for crime, almost every unit was purchased the day it went on sale.

He predicts layoffs won't affect his neighbors the way they will other parts of the city. They are more likely to call Rutgers-Camden police before they dial 911.

"It's not that they're not concerned, but they're less concerned because we pretty much have our own police department right here that is not going to experience any of the cutbacks the city police are," said Yoder, president of the Cooper Grant Neighborhood Association.

A previous holder of the title "most dangerous city in America" -- and currently behind only St. Louis -- Camden is pressing on with plans to build more new homes in Cooper Grant. Securing permits seems to present a more arduous challenge to expansion than criminal activity.

"As the city is experiencing cuts in staffing, it makes it more difficult to get things approved and processed through the city," Yoder explained. "That's what's more concerning to us, rather than the safety part."

If you ask 21-year-old Bason Edmonds where he's from, he may not be exactly truthful. His lease in East Camden is up in June, but already the retailer and model has dreams of living elsewhere.

"Right now I sometimes say I live in Collingswood or Pennsauken," he admitted. "The friends that do

know, we really don't talk about it."

The safety issue in town is one that looms large in his mind, especially for those who come to visit him.

"I can't even tell a friend to come visit me," Edmonds said. "When I want to meet him at the transportation center, there are constantly people begging him for money."

What prosperity there is in the city, to Edmonds, doesn't filter out beyond the confines of the waterfront and central business district.

"It's just empty, vacant homes and Cooper," he said. "It's ridiculous. Where's the money if it's not going to cops?"

Then there are those who could be directly affected by a layoff. Orlando Munoz, senior sanitation inspector with the city, has had to readjust his spending and dig into his savings to make up for furlough days over 26 weeks his union agreed to in response to the city's financial crisis.

It hasn't been check-to-check living for Munoz, but he and his wife have to be frugal. He fears a potential layoff will put him back to a starting point from which his family won't recover.

"I always thought I had a job for life," Munoz said. "Now all of a sudden, boom, I have to start all over again at 51 years old. The people that are affected by this are tormented right now."

When Munoz first signed on with public works, the department had about 200 workers. In the layoff plan, the city acknowledges it will have to consolidate various work groups and handle calls based on critical need.

"There are going to be no services out here," Munoz said. "It's bad enough we work with a skeleton crew as it is now. It's going to be terrible."

Like many in his department, Munoz subscribes to the "broken windows" theory, in which a community's physical blemishes invite criminal activity.

"When you have more trash, you have more trashed-up lots," he explained. "Then the people who are doing whatever they're doing in the street will do it more."

Twenty-five laborers in Public Works are expected to be cut, leaving 15 to cover a city with 80,000 residents and thousands of abandoned properties.

"It was time to do something," said Munoz, who lived in the city's Whitman Park section for three decades before moving to the suburbs recently. "It's just me, my wife and my Chihuahua. It was time to do something."

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