

Otis Elevator Brings Hope To SC

Jim Davenport, Associated Press

FLORENCE, S.C. (AP) — South Carolina's jobless rate has done little but increase the last few years. Still, Republican Gov. Nikki Haley found some hope Friday as Otis Elevator announced it is bringing 360 jobs when it open a major East Coast plant.

Haley posts the unemployment rate in every one of her Statehouse staff offices on copy paper. She has only seen a steady stream of bad news, including Friday's 11.1 percent rate for August. It tied Washington, D.C., as the nation's fourth worst. In July, when South Carolina tied with Michigan for third at 10.9 percent, behind only Nevada and California.

Haley told a crowd of about 400 on what will be the factory floor of Otis Elevator's new \$40 million fabrication, research and shipping plant that it was a great day for the state and that she's dedicated to winning jobs here. She promised to be so involved that "I am now a new employee of your company."

The long-vacant plant that once made Maytag laundry gear swallowed up the crowd. Maytag once employed 600 in a 422,000-square-foot building that could house four Walmarts. It shut down in 2006 and it has had other, smaller tenants since.

Otis is adding a 150-foot test tower — mostly shaft with a roof, floor, walls and air between. Its 360 workers, hired during the next five years, will make an average of \$25 an hour — a figure skewed by higher-paid engineers that will work at higher salaries. The company has no breakdown for factory floor workers. It plans to begin hiring by year's end.

The big emptiness provided scale to Haley's job problem.

South Carolina's unemployment grew by 3,300 to 239,170 between July and August as the number of employed shrank by nearly 500 to 1.9 million, data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows.

There's no doubt the jobs are needed here. The Florence metro area is in the center of an agriculture and manufacturing area with a jobless rate of 11.9 percent in August.

The state is riding national trends with an economy driven by consumer spending: Manufacturing jobs are barely recovering in South Carolina from the recession and the tide for seasonal tourism jobs is going out this time of year.

Haley told reporters after her speech that the joblessness numbers must come down.

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"I'm frustrated by the unemployment number, but I know we're filling the jobs funnel," Haley said. She notes three jobs announcements have come this week. "I'm going to continue to bring more jobs announcements and when that funnel gets full and its starts to distribute, that number will come down."

Haley's efforts to stop the job drain have been an issue for months.

Lately, she's defended spending \$127,000 on a trip to Europe to court companies at the Paris Air Show and suppliers for the state's manufacturers, including Boeing Co. and BMW Manufacturing Inc. Included in that trip were state efforts to recruit suppliers for Otis, a unit of Connecticut-based United Technologies Inc.

"We will aggressively start to target their suppliers now to get them closer in so that they can service Otis and so that we can hire some more people in South Carolina," Haley said.

Haley also has pledged to help employers keep unions out. And before Friday's announcement, Otis, which has union workers elsewhere, got a pep talk on that front, too, said Sen. Hugh Leatherman, a Florence Republican. "I explained to them we're a right-to-work state," Leatherman said. "At the same time, they're sensitive to unions, they go back with unions a long, long time."

Asked about whether the work force there would be unionized, Didier Michaud-Daniel, president of Otis Elevator Co., said he only expects to have the best employees possible. He said he's already working on moving families to Florence to take jobs.

"My point today: I want the best labor force possible," Michaud-Daniel said.

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