Space Workers Struggle A Year After Last Shuttle

Mike Schneider, Associated Press

TITUSVILLE, Florida (AP) — A year after NASA ended the three-decade-long U.S. space shuttle program, thousands of formerly well-paid engineers and other workers around the Kennedy Space Center are still struggling to find jobs to replace the careers that flourished when shuttles blasted off from the Florida "Space Coast."

Some have headed to South Carolina to build airplanes in that state's growing industry, and others have moved as far as Afghanistan to work as government contractors. Some found lower-paying jobs beneath their technical skills that allowed them to stay. Many are still looking for work and cutting back on things like driving and utilities to save money.

"Nobody wants to hire the old guy," said Terry White, a 62-year-old former project manager who worked 33 years for the shuttle program until he was laid off after Atlantis landed last July 21. "There just isn't a lot of work around here. Or if so, the wages are really small."

White earned more than $100,000 a year at the end of his career at the space center. The prospects of finding a job that pays anywhere near that along the Space Coast are slim.

"I could take an $11-an-hour job that is 40 miles away," he said "But with gas prices and all that, it's not really worthwhile."

More than 7,400 people, who once had labored on one of history's most complicated engineering achievements, lost their jobs when the shuttle program ended last July. While other shuttle workers in Houston, New Orleans and Huntsville, Alabama, lost jobs, those areas had bigger economies to absorb the workers. In less economically diverse Brevard County, the mainly contractor positions cut by NASA accounted for just under 5 percent of the county's private sector jobs.

The Kennedy Space Center's current workforce of 8,500 workers is the smallest in more in than 35 years. In the middle of the last decade, the space center employed around 15,000 workers.

James Peek, a 48-year-old quality inspector for the shuttles, has applied for 50 positions with no success since he was laid off in October 2010. He has taken odd jobs glazing windows for a luxury hotel in Orlando and working as a security guard. He has no health insurance and incurred a $13,000 bill when he was hospitalized for three days last May.

"With most companies, it's like your application goes into a black hole," Peek said. "We're struggling to stay afloat."

Jobless space workers have signed up for Brevard Workforce's job placement and training services. Slightly more than half of the 5,700 workers the agency has been able to track have found jobs, but more than a quarter of those positions were outside Florida. Those jobs have been in the fields of engineering, mechanics and security, according to the agency.

Brevard County's unemployment rate spiked in the months that the shuttle program wound down, going from 10.6 percent in April 2011 to 11.7 percent in August 2011. It has since declined to 9 percent, a result of a smaller workforce as many former shuttle workers either moved away or retired earlier than planned. Brevard County has added 2,700 jobs since the beginning of the year, but many are in the southern part of the 72-mile (116-kilometer)-long county where information technology giant Harris Corp. and airplane-maker Embraer are located. Jobless space workers in the northern part of the county jokingly refer to those high-tech workers as "their rich cousins."

Some local employers are finding that the former space workers' salary demands are sometimes too high.

"STOP sending former Space Center employees," one employer wrote to Brevard Workforce, the local job agency, in a comment included in its monthly committee report. "They have an unrealistic salary expectation."

Taxpayer money allocated for job training programs for displaced space shuttle workers also is dwindling a year after the program ended.

Adding to the difficulties of finding a new job is the age of many of the former shuttle workers. Many spent their entire careers working on the space shuttles and are now in their 50s and 60s.

In between sending out resumes and meeting at networking events, many of the space workers are volunteering at Kennedy Space Center, giving tours to dignitaries and providing oral histories to tourists who stop by the Vehicle Assembly Building.

Even though many of the older space workers like White had years to plan for the end of the shuttle program, they stuck around, hoping to prepare the orbiters for displays in museums in Florida, Los Angeles and Washington after the program ended. They expected younger shuttle workers to move over to the successor Constellation program whose goal was to send astronauts to the moon and then Mars. But the cancellation of the Constellation program in 2010 increased the competition for those few jobs left prepping the shuttles.

Some shuttle workers, such as Kevin Harrington, had been holding out hope that the program announced after Constellation's demise — a heavy-lift rocket system that would launch astronauts in an Orion space capsule — would offer immediate widespread job opportunities. But the plans announced last year won't have unmanned test launches of the Space Launch System for another five years, and the first manned mission won't be for about another decade.

Private-sector companies, such as Paypal founder Elon Musk's Space X, are starting unmanned launches from Kennedy Space Center, but their need for workers doesn't come close to what was required for the shuttle program.

"We expected a little more action from our government, at least in figuring out what direction we're going to go in," said Harrington, 55, who worked on the shuttles' thermal protection system earning about $80,000 a year. "Ultimately, that would inform which direction we would go in. A lot of us thought, since we have such deep roots in the community, we could wait it out. It was hopeful at first. Now it isn't so hopeful. Things aren't moving fast."

Many of the former space workers find camaraderie and job tips each Friday at the weekly breakfast of the Spacecoast Technical Network, a group created by former Kennedy Space Center workers. Just hours before 70 members dined on eggs, biscuits and coffee at a recent meeting, three Chinese astronauts parachuted back to Earth in a capsule halfway around the world. For the space workers, it was yet another sign of the growing competition facing the United States as a leader of space exploration. At the moment, the United States has no way of sending astronauts to space in its own vehicles, and NASA is relying on the Soviet-made Soyuz capsules to send U.S. astronauts to the international space station.

One of the network's founders, Bill Bender, recently joined more than two dozen other colleagues working on a reconnaissance project for a contractor in Afghanistan where they are earning six-figure annual incomes.

Bender had been out of work for about a year from his job on the cancelled Constellation program when he took the one-year contract to work halfway around the world.

"As the months passed, I began to realize the hard reality that things I had known and taken for granted no longer existed. Stable work, good pay, benefits, etc. were no longer a reasonable expectation," Bender wrote in a recent email from Afghanistan. "As time went by and it was getting closer to a year without a job ... the (Afghan) opportunity looked better and better. The money was very good due to compensation for hardship and danger."

Those who have remained on the Space Coast without jobs are cutting back on small luxuries. Harrington has trimmed back on eating out and vacations.

Al Schmidt, who worked 27 years at the space center, has cut back on using his car and utilities at home to save money. The 60-year-old's unemployment benefits are running out soon, and without a new U.S. space program offering ready-to-go jobs, he is contemplating retirement, something he doesn't want to do.

"I live day to day. I can't afford new cars or lots of groceries," Schmidt said. "From where I sit, there is nothing coming online soon enough to resolve my problem."

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