

A YEAR OF STRONG GROWTH

STATEWIDE ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE

BY PATRICK BARKEY

If you pay close attention, you will notice that almost all economic forecasts have two things in common – first, they are optimistic. Recessions are much less common than growth, after all. But those forecasts are usually accompanied by a second thing – a long list of problems that could make those optimistic forecasts go bad; such as a downturn in energy, mining and farming businesses. But other parts of Montana’s economy remained strong in 2015 and the state went on to post a good year.

In 2015, the state economy was up over 6,000 jobs and more than \$600 million in wages and salaries compared to the previous fiscal year. That job growth was in line with the previous three years, but wage growth in FY 2015 was more than twice as strong as 2014. Together with falling unemployment rates and surging tax revenues, 2015 saw the Montana economy operate much closer to full capacity.

Looking at the wage growth in some major industry categories gives insight into how this came about. Except for the declines in mining wages, due to setbacks in both oil production and metal mining, the story across Montana’s industries was one of growth. Construction and manufacturing were especially strong, posting percentage growth rates of 8.5 and 5.5 percent in FY 2015, respectively. Even public administration, which

excludes schools from the government total, registered growth.

Growth in construction wages does not signal a rebound in single family home construction, which has only begun to show signs of life after almost six years of depressed levels. It’s largely been driven by multi-family residential, commercial and industrial projects, together with civil construction projects. Western Montana is seeing more residential construction, particularly in Bozeman, with Billings experiencing more commercial and industrial projects.

Signs of the steep decline in crude oil prices since mid-2014 are apparent in the economic performance of the oil patch counties on the eastern edge of the state, which have begun to slide after years of strong growth. It’s too soon to register the impact of lower wheat prices on activity in counties with a high grain farming presence and the strength in retail trade and the accommodations industries is consistent with estimates of higher spending by non-resident visitors.

The patterns of greater balance, both geographically and across industries, continue to unfold across Montana. With the exception of Butte-Silver Bow, whose economy has been buffeted by lower commodity prices, growth in western Montana continues to improve, with the torrid growth in the east cooling significantly. ■