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Leaders see job growth from shale

Residents might have to drive farther to work

By Joseph Deinlein

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— *(A series on the Valley's struggling job market)*

There were about 9,100 people unemployed in the Valley in July.

And likely that number will rise when the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry releases its August unemployment figures for Montour, Northumberland, Snyder and Union counties.

Some have said the future of employment in the Valley might lay underground, in the form of natural gas.

Companies tapping the Marcellus Shale, a geological formation 5,000 to 8,000 feet down estimated to contain tril lions of cubic feet of natural gas, are hiring.

“They’re good-paying jobs,” said Sue Snyder, administrator of the Pennsylvania Career- Link office in Selinsgrove.

The problem: The bulk of the 150 jobs available are in counties many miles away, such as Lycoming, Tioga and Bradford.

A single job related to natural gas drilling — a tractor-trailer driver for JP Donmoyer — is in Northumberland County.

“Most people tell us they don’t want to travel more than 20 minutes from home,” Snyder said. “But with the number of factories closing, they’re having to travel farther, and they’re not used to that mindset.”

As the economy goes through its slow growth pangs, that mindset likely will have to change.

But Charlie Ross, president of the Greater Susquehanna Valley Chamber of Commerce, said recently the area is on the cusp of having to make a major decision.

Business and community leaders will need to think long and hard about the possibilities that could come from tapping the natural gas market.

“Is it the production of fresh water? Cleaning of dirty sand? Pipeline possibilities? Construction of housing?” he said. “If we begin addressing that now, if we’re able to focus sharply enough on a particular segment, we can be a part of the opportunity offered by the Marcellus Shale.”

Snyder agreed, noting businesses that rely on those employed in the industry could benefit, too.

“As that industry grows, through housing, restaurants, hotels, motels, rental properties — it’s going to start coming down into our area,” she said.

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