McKinley, Cibola unemployment numbers decrease

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Officials say decrease is 'seasonal'

New Mexico's seasonally adjusted unemployment rate was 6.2 percent in April, unchanged from March and down from 6.6 percent a year ago, officials said.

In McKinley County, the unemployment rate was 7.8 percent for April 2016, which is a decrease from March's 8.6 percent. In neighboring Cibola County — a 55-minute drive from Gallup, wherein Grants is the county seat — the unemployment rate for April was 6.1 percent. That figure was down from a 6.7 percent rate in March.

Monthly unemployment statistics are one month behind, due to the amount of time it takes to compile them.

"It's definitely good news and it is also something that, one could argue, is cyclical," Bill Lee — former McKinley County manager, McKinley County Commissioner-elect (District 3), and current chief executive officer at the Gallup-McKinley County Chamber of Commerce — said in a phone interview. "You have to look at summer youth employment jobs and construction jobs, as well on the whole. I have seen my share of construction projects around the county."

Tracy Shaleen, an economist with the state Department of Work Force Solutions, said total payroll growth began to trend downward in late 2015, driven primarily by a downturn in mining

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and mining-related employment.

"One significant change in April was the absence of any over-the-year gains in leisure and hospitality employment, which appears to be due to atypical changes in several sub-sectional changes in the industry," Shaleen said in a phone interview.

Shaleen echoed Lee's explanation of the downward-leaning unemployment rates in McKinley and Cibola counties, adding that construction, other outdoor-oriented jobs, and seasonal summer employment — no matter how temporary — are allowing economies like McKinley's to see lower unemployment rates.

"I think when you consider the case of McKinley County, it is important to look at weather and things like construction jobs," he said. "That is a big factor in a county like McKinley when analyzing not only McKinley County, but some other counties in the state as well."

The national unemployment rate was 5 percent — unchanged from March — and down from 5.4 percent in April 2015.

Luna County, located in the southwestern section of New Mexico, carried the highest unemployment rate at 15.6 percent. Union County, in the northeastern part of New Mexico, has the state's lowest unemployment rate at 3 percent.

There are 33 counties in New Mexico.

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