

BUSINESS

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SECTION D

Valley wages above average

By Jonathan J. Higuera
The Arizona Republic

\$733 a week is low, though, for a metro area

What do you get when you average the wages of Maricopa County's workforce, from chief executive officers to part-time clerks?

How about a weekly wage of \$733?

Although it may not be the

best barometer of an area's prevailing wage rates, that figure can be used to compare the Valley with other counties.

In this case, a federal report found Maricopa County's average weekly wage is slightly better than the national average of

\$724. But it's quite a bit lower than the average wages of the nation's other major population centers.

Among the nation's top 10 counties based on workforce size, Maricopa ranked ninth in average pay, besting only Mi-

ami-Dade.

"It seems like a lot of the jobs we are creating pay a modest income," said George Fleming, a local career transition consultant who works with senior and midlevel executives. "Those that cycle out of high-

paying jobs often have to go elsewhere."

Still, many Valley residents who toil for much less, would welcome a weekly paycheck of \$733.

"If that was the (wage) everybody was making, we would have a much better economy,"

WAGES Valley beats U.S. average

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said Mike Vespoli, director of community affairs for the United Food and Commercial Workers, Local 99. "If it was per capita, we would be in better shape."

The county's weekly average translates to \$18.32 an hour for a 40-hour week, or \$38,116 a year. That's far better than the 2003 per capita annual income for the state, which was \$26,838.

While many are quick to cite the low-paying nature of jobs currently being created as the culprit, Tom Rex, an economist at Arizona State University, has a different explanation. He says many people who move here are willing to accept lower wages in exchange for a perceived higher quality of life. Their acceptance enables em-

ployers to pay less.

"If you as an employer can attract labor here at a given wage, why would you want to pay more?" he said. "It's really a balance between supply and demand."

He and other ASU researchers are working on a study that analyzes the quality of jobs being created here. Arizona has been among the nation's leaders in job growth the past couple of years.

The release of the wage study from the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics also reported that the 47,000 new jobs Maricopa County generated from June 2003 to June 2004 was third-best in the country.

Only Orange County, Calif., and Clark County, Nev., had more, at 55,700 and 55,000 jobs, respectively.

"Job quality isn't the major

reason why wages are low here," Rex said. "The major reason is something else, and that can be a lot of different things."

David Thompson, a former information technology executive who has been looking for a senior-level executive position since May, was surprised by the Valley's average weekly wage, which he thought was lower.

The region's cost of living should be considered when trying to evaluate the region's wages, he added.

The Phoenix region's cost of living mirrors the national average, a quarterly cost-of-living index suggests.

"The perception is that this is a lower-wage state," he said. "This suggests we're doing better than we thought."