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HOUSTON AT WORK



Joe Gayle/American Color photo

RED HOT SKILLS: Deochand Singh of Skilled Craftsmen of Texas does welding at a job site. Several factors have contributed to more opportunities for welders, machinists and mechanical assemblers in Texas.

Demand for more skilled tradesmen increases locally

By **LISA RICHARDS**
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Fall 2004 is turning out to be a strong season for skilled tradesmen. "We have never been busier," said Rob Goodson, who is a branch manager with Magnum Staffing Services crafts, skills and trades division.

"Several factors are creating a demand for workers, even the four hurricanes that struck Florida in August and September," he said. "We're not sending our guys to the East Coast because of the hurricanes, but we are seeing a residual effect."

Flooding has forced a number of East Coast fabrication firms to temporarily stop working, he said. Houston companies are among those picking up the slack.

That scenario results in opportunity for many of the welders, machinists and mechanical assemblers that Magnum

places with oil industry manufacturers.

Kyle Williams, general manager of Bison Building Materials Conroe location, believes the hurricanes could have more impact on Houston's job market when the rebuilding process begins in Florida.

The demand for skilled tradesmen could sharpen considerably in Houston if large numbers of area tradesmen decided to join the Florida construction projects.

But Williams doesn't see that happening right away.

"We're probably looking at two to three months at least until FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) gets in there, and insurance claims start getting settled," Williams said.

That timetable would have workers accepting jobs in Florida this January.

"But for now, even without a population shift, demand for skilled tradesmen is

high in Houston," Williams said.

His company, a mill work and lumber distribution operation, provides building materials for residential construction. Williams has seen an especially strong demand among the contractors he serves for skilled, reliable carpenters.

"One of the issues now is getting good, experienced framing crews," Williams said. "They're not just sitting on every corner. The good ones are hard to find."

The strong home-building market poses opportunities for a number of skilled tradesmen, from electricians to dry wall specialists, he said.

"Normally, October is the beginning of a fairly slow season for craftsmen and workers," said Daniel Gibbs, vice president of Skilled Craftsmen of Texas. But if the last few months are reliable indicators, 2004 may see a different trend.

"August and September have been

really good months," said Gibbs, whose firm places machinists, welders, pipe fitters and assemblers. "We've almost doubled the number of customers we serve in a two-week period."

Gibbs attributes the opportunity to a healthier economy. The rising cost of oil makes it more profitable for companies in the oil industry to operate, he said. That creates opportunities for tradesmen in manufacturing settings.

The current situation is ideal for a placement firm that can provide people on a project-by-project basis. Firms are hiring temporary workers.

"The thing about my industry is people are nervous about the longevity of the economic rebound," Gibbs said.

"I believe things will stay strong through the end of the year."