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BUSINESS

N.O. tops 500,000 jobs

BR also up for March; Houma employment hotspot

By [GARY PERILLOUX](#)

Advocate business writer

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For the first time since Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans metro area climbed over the 500,000-job hump in March.

The milestone remains a sobering signpost on the road to recovery for Louisiana's biggest urban center: New Orleans still must create 126,000 jobs to reach its pre-Katrina peak.

Meanwhile, Houma has become Louisiana's hottest per-capita job market. Since March 2006, that metro area — which includes Thibodaux and Bayou Cane — has added 7,100 jobs.

New Orleans has added 31,800 jobs in the past year — a 6.8 percent increase — but Houma's rate of employment growth is a brisk 8.2 percent.

By comparison, Baton Rouge has added 4,600 jobs since March 2006, a 1.2 percent gain. Baton Rouge added 2,200 jobs last month, while Lafayette employment grew by 900.

"I think Houma's growth right now is connected to the growth of the oil and gas industry — and maybe some overflow from New Orleans," LSU economist Jim Richardson said. "Baton Rouge right now has made adjustments to a new size, and it's going to grow more substantially over the next couple of years."

Proof is in the construction sector, where Baton Rouge's nearly 40,000 jobs are 7,000 more than in New Orleans. A Shintec chemical plant near Addis and Big Cajun's expansion of its New Roads power plant are both \$1 billion projects under way, along with numerous planned industrial maintenance projects and brisk commercial building.

"I think the industrial part really helps augment the Baton Rouge numbers," Richardson said. "And there are a number of big jobs going on here."

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Today, New Orleans is exactly 75,000 jobs above its post-Katrina bottom of 425,800 in October 2005. In 2006, New Orleans grew by an average 3,700 jobs a month, but the March gain is the city's biggest since August.

The region had been in general decline since a peak of 627,000 jobs in December 1999 fell to 604,000 jobs just prior to Katrina. Baton Rouge has added 30,400 jobs since the end of 1999, while Houma has gained 18,400 jobs.

In New Orleans, almost all the March gains came in one major sector, said Patty Lopez, who manages labor market information for the state's Department of Labor.

"Employment gains were pretty much spread out through the service-providing sector," Lopez said of a 3,900-job growth there. "Part of the increase over the month, too, is from picking up state and local government jobs as school is back in full swing."

Statewide, Louisiana's unemployment rate inched up to 4.1 percent from 4.0 percent in February. The national jobless rate is 4.4 percent.

Every state metro area gained jobs in March. Here are the changes from February, first, and then from March 2006:

- New Orleans, up 4,400; up 31,800.
- Baton Rouge, up 2,200; up 4,600.
- Lafayette, up 900; up 4,000.
- Shreveport-Bossier City, up 500; no change.
- Lake Charles, up 700; up 1,900.
- Monroe, up 800; up 1,100.
- Houma-Bayou Cane-Thibodaux, up 1,100; up 7,100.
- Alexandria, up 600; up 900.



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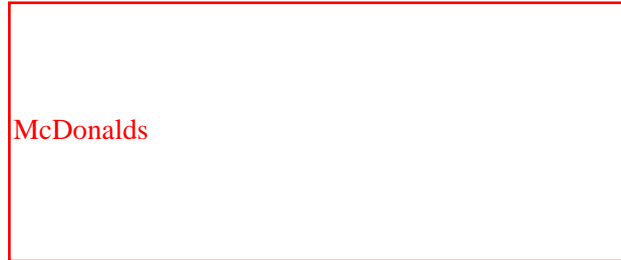
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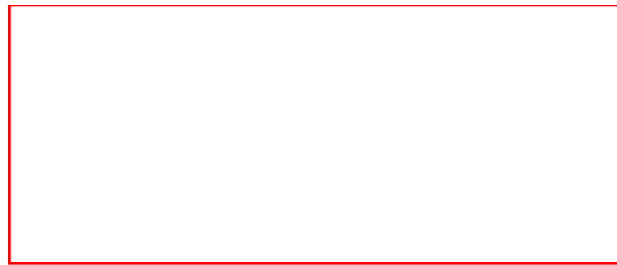


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