

Not many workers want to do the Puyallup as a job

By Charlotte Hsu

Seattle Times staff reporter

PUYALLUP — A whiteboard in a trailer on the Puyallup fairgrounds touts job options for applicants in soft red ink: Elephant Ears, Strawberry Shortcake, Sales — Sheepskin Products, Funnel Cakes and Fudge are among possibilities.

But on Thursday, the slowest first day of hiring in years for the Puyallup Fair, few eyes scanned the job listings. By midafternoon, about 100 applicants had filed through the trailer, a third of the number who usually come the first day.

State workers who help applicants meet potential employers sat idle, typing on laptops or staring out the trailer door.

Employers are seeking 3,000 fair workers through the state employment agency WorkSource, which staffed the trailer Thursday.

That's double the number the agency sought last year, reflecting vendors' inability this year to fill slots on their own, said Karen LaFlamme, fair spokeswoman.

The fair's problems mirror a statewide trend. A Washington Employment Security Department survey of more than 15,000 businesses statewide showed an estimated 81,500 jobs vacant in April.

That's 11,000 more than a year earlier and the largest number of openings in the survey's four-year history.

Evelina Tainer, a chief economist at the department, said few workers are willing to take temporary jobs like those at next month's fair when higher-paying, permanent positions are open across the state.

"Our overall economy has been doing very well. ... It's easier for everybody to find jobs," she said.

The Evergreen State Fair in Monroe also is facing challenges hiring this year,

fair staff said.

With school out, the Monroe fair has a waiting list of applicants for jobs with no age requirement. But jobs like cashiering, available only to adults, are still open, said Barb Drake, fair personnel coordinator. Of 400 positions, 50 remain unfilled, she added.

Thursday afternoon, the Puyallup fairgrounds were quiet. The sound of a single hammer echoed, and a solitary worker made repairs on the roller coaster, its tracks rising and dipping, a giant, white wooden wave frozen in motion.

But when the fair begins Sept. 8, 1 million visitors or more will cram into the fairgrounds over two weeks, LaFlamme said.

They will be there for lemonade and fudge, hot dogs and barns filled with fat, snorting animals.

And Alannah Blakey, 17, a student from Puyallup, will be there, too, cashiering for Earthquake Burgers. She got the job after an interview Thursday, and said working the fair isn't about money.

"Everybody's always having a good time," she said. "You get to know people."

Still, for many around the state, work is about money. So the fair, where many jobs pay minimum wage, \$7.63 an hour, is having trouble competing this year with a strong economy.

Beverly Burback, a part owner of Funtastic Games and Rides, says she will need 1,000 employees in Puyallup. Finding them may be difficult.

Thursday afternoon, the employment office was as quiet as the rest of the fairgrounds, where the rides were silent, their spinning seats lying still in the sun, their green- and rose-colored lights off, dark.

Charlotte Hsu: 206-464-8349 or chsu@seattletimes.com