

# BUSINESS

THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

## Labor Day blues: Michigan lags the rest of

### UNEMPLOYMENT

Monthly unemployment rates for the U.S., Michigan and Midwest for January-July 2003:

	U.S.	Michigan	Midwest*
Jan.	5.7%	6.2%	5.3%
Feb.	5.8%	6.6%	5.5%
March	5.8%	6.7%	5.6%
April	6.0%	6.6%	5.5%
May	6.1%	6.7%	5.5%
June	6.4%	7.2%	5.7%
July	6.2%	7.4%	5.8%

\*Includes Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Nebraska, Ohio and Wisconsin  
Sources: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Anderson Economic Group

PRESS GRAPHIC

By Rick Haglund  
Grand Rapids Press Bureau

DETROIT — Hundreds of thousands of Michigan residents are taking an extended respite this Labor Day, but not because they want one.

About 378,000 job-seekers can't find employment in the state, even though it has been nearly two years since the national recession was declared over.

More troubling, some economists say, is that the nation's jobless rate is starting to fall, while Michigan's continues to rise. Unemployment in the state hit a 10-year high of 7.4 percent in July; the national rate dropped to 6.2 percent.

The lack of work is so acute in Michigan that more than 53,000 long-

term unemployed workers are now eligible for an extra 13 weeks of jobless benefits under a federal program.

"I'm starting to get worried about the uptick in unemployment in Michigan," said Patrick Anderson, who heads the Anderson Economic Group in Lansing. "The recession is over except for the Michigan unemployment rate."

Many point to a stunning loss of manufacturing jobs in Michigan as a major reason why the state is lagging the rest of the country in a less-than-scintillating national economic recovery.

The state has lost 169,800 manufacturing jobs, or 18.8 percent of total manufacturing employment since June 2000, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The nation as a whole

lost 15.5 percent of its manufacturing jobs in the same period.

Stiff global competition, financial problems in the auto supply business, the near-collapse of the office furniture industry and the relocation of jobs to Mexico, China and other low-cost countries are cited as reasons for the devastation in Michigan manufacturing.

In response, Gov. Jennifer Granholm will hold an unprecedented manufacturing summit this fall in which she will gather business, labor and economic leaders to try to find ways of retaining and adding manufacturing jobs.

It promises to be a monumental task. Domestic automakers are facing stiff competition from Asian and European competitors that are dotting low-cost

### EXECUTIVE PROFILE

## Erhardt started young, but thought big

► His construction company's project list includes the Amway Grand, Van Andel Arena and Institute and now, DeVos Place.

By Joe Snapper  
The Grand Rapids Press

Joe Erhardt's first day on the job found him extracting old nails from junked wood — a pair of Vise-Grip his only tool.

"There'd be a room they'd want to put carpet in and it'd be full" of debris, said Erhardt, recalling how, as a 16-year-old, he rode his bike from driver's education classes to help his father's work crew at a school renovation project in Ada.

"We were doing demolition. That first day all I did was pull nails."

How things have changed since his first job in 1975.

Erhardt is still visiting construction sites, but you're not likely to find him pulling nails.

Now, he is holding a clipboard or a cell phone, helping direct operations on one of the many projects underway by his firm, Erhardt Construction. He has gone from nail puller to president of the Ada firm, a job he has had since 1989.

He was leading tours last week of the \$220 million DeVos Place convention center in downtown Grand Rapids. Its first convention will be in December, though the entire project, which includes replacing Welsh Auditorium with a banquet hall, will be completed in 2005.

Erhardt Construction, which has 85 employees, is working with Indiana-based Hunt Construction Group as general contractors for the 1 million-square-foot convention center.

It is a career you could say Erhardt



PRESS PHOTO/LANCE WYNN

Joe Erhardt, president of Erhardt Construction Co., inside the Grand Gallery of the new DeVos Place convention center on Monroe Ave. The \$220 million building is still under construction, but scheduled for the first convention in December.

was born into.

He was just 3 years old when his father launched the business from the basement of their home.

Now 44, Joseph Erhardt is just as comfortable in a hard hat as he is in a necktie.

"That's the snake light," he said of a 500-foot-long swerving, suspended light bank, which resembles a giant fish skeleton dangling the length of the Grand Gallery. "They wanted something unusual."

Under his watchful eye, some 300

workers, his own and subcontractors, scurry to complete part of the facility ahead of December's woodworkers convention — the facility's inaugural event.

Erhardt spends at least 10 hours a week at DeVos Place — a role he prefers, though one he has to watch now that he's

running the company.

"The hands-on stuff was fun," he said. "You get up into management and at the end of the day you're not real sure what you did."

"This has just been a blast being involved in this," Erhardt said of the DeVos Place project. "It's a little more hands-on. Some days you wish you could pick up the saw and the hammer so you know what happened."

Four years after pulling nails, Erhardt, in 1979, laid out the foundations for the Calder Plaza Building downtown. Two years later, as a project engineer, he helped build the Amway Grand Plaza tower.

Indeed, the company's marketing brochure reads like a who's who of West Michigan structures — its credits include the Van Andel Institute, Van Andel Arena and the future Grand Rapids Art Museum.

"We generally work within an hour of Grand Rapids; it's a company and a family thing," Erhardt said. "We don't have a real aggressive growth policy like some of our competitors. We don't have people

## Erhardt CONSTRUCTION

- The Joseph P. Erhardt File
- Company: Erhardt Construction
- Position: President
- Address: 6060 E. Fulton St., Ada
- Employees: 85
- Education: Civil Engineering, Michigan Technological Institute
- He said: "Some days you wish you could pick up the hammer and saw so you know what happened."

who want to move away from their families for a week."

Company founder Larry Erhardt, Sr. serves as chairman, and another son, Larry, Jr., is a company vice president.