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South Carolina's leisure and hospitality industries are showing promising gains, according to a recent workforce report.

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While job growth has been generally sluggish across both the state and nation, South Carolina's leisure and hospitality industries are showing promising gains, according to a recent workforce report.

By the end of February, the hospitality and leisure industry had added more jobs over the past year — 10,800 — than any other industry in the state, according to the report from the S.C. Department of Employment and Workforce. That increase brought the total number of hospitality and leisure workers to 212,200, a 5.36 percent increase over February 2012.

Industry-specific numbers were not available for Beaufort County, but the county's unemployment rate fell to 7.2 percent in February from 7.6 percent in January. It was 8.7 percent in February 2012. The county has the seventh lowest unemployment rate among the state's 46 counties.

The growth echoes improving tourism trends, both nationally and in the Lowcountry, according to John Salazar, a professor of hospitality management at the University of South Carolina Beaufort and director of the Lowcountry and Resort Island Tourism Institute.

Like most industries, the need for hospitality and leisure workers increases with demand for the product, Salazar said.

"We're no different than the construction floors at General Motors," he said, expect here cars are restaurant dinners and trucks are cleaned hotel rooms.

Salazar points to improving hotel occupancy rates as evidence of more travelers and

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even stronger numbers this year. His business increased by 12 percent in the first quarter 2013, he said.

“April is (also) looking like a real strong month,” he added.

The hotel employs 45 to 50 people, a number that has remained stable for several years, Barnes said.

But if business continues to be as strong as it has been in the past few months, Barnes said he'll hire more workers to keep up.

Employing seasonal workers is common in the area, especially in spring, as the tourist season approaches.

The state workforce report reflects that trend: 4,100 workers were hired by the leisure and hospitality industry in February. Only the government hired more people.

Year-over-year increases suggest that more than just temporary work is available.

Steve Carb, president of the SERG Restaurant Group, which employs 500-600 workers throughout the year in several bars and restaurants on Hilton Head and in Bluffton, says the group already has completed its seasonal hiring but expects more jobs to open up later this year.

The group plans to launch two new restaurants — one this summer on the south end of the island and another this winter or early next spring located mid-island. It will hire staff for both, Carb said. He declined to say where, exactly, the restaurants will be or give the names or styles of the restaurants.

Hiring seasonal and part-time workers is necessary to deal with the summer crowds, but Carb said the group prefers employing full-time, year-round staff because such

workers typically are more “fully engaged and committed” to the job. That, he says,

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When you have more occupancy, you have more revenue. When you have more revenue, the economic health of this industry (creates) jobs and small business success,” she said.

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