

Thousands target local jobs

By [John Dayberry](#) | Hickory Daily Record

For Stephanie Underwood and Sara Hayes, the job fair at Target's new regional distribution center didn't come a moment too soon.

"We've been waiting on this for months," said Underwood, a 35-year-old Hickory resident who was laid off from GE Security in December.

"It's getting dire," she said. "There's nothing out there."

Underwood and her friend Hayes, who lost a job at Corning Cable Systems in November, were among several thousand people who descended on the 1.6-million-square-foot distribution center on Thursday for the first of three job fairs.

The fairs, which will continue from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. today and Saturday, are expected to attract more than 15,000 job seekers, said Sue Gilliam, human resources manager.

Given the region's soaring unemployment rate, the large turnout is understandable.

On Thursday, the N.C. Employment Security Commission announced that unemployment in Catawba County reached 13.1 percent in January, the highest rate in 34 years. The jobless rates in neighboring Burke County and Caldwell County were even higher: 14 percent and 14.6 percent, respectively.

By noon Thursday, nearly 2,000 job seekers had shown up at Target's sprawling facility on N.C. 10 near its intersection with U.S. 321.

Traffic into and out of the site was steady but manageable, said officers with the Newton Police Department.

Things were equally as orderly inside, where applicants for warehousing and packing jobs were ushered into staging areas where they learned more about Target and its distribution facilities and were invited to fill out applications.

Applicants also got a look at the cavernous distribution center, which contains eight miles of conveyors and 216 dock doors.

The \$90 million facility, the largest distribution center in the Charlotte region, is a prototype for Target's regional distribution centers, said Rick Scholtes, general manager.

"This is our jewel," Scholtes said.

The distribution center, scheduled to open in June, will employ as many as 450 people this year and 580 people eventually.

Interviews will be scheduled within the next 60 days, and hiring will take place in May and June, Gilliam said.

The project was announced in 2006, nearly two years after Target launched a search in the Southeast for a distribution facility site to serve the eastern seaboard.

"Catawba County has been waiting for Target's job fair to finally get here for a long time now," said Danny Hearn, president of the Catawba County Chamber of Commerce.

"I am sure that they will be overwhelmed with not only large crowds but with great, hard-working people who need a job and will make outstanding employees.

"Hopefully, this significant event will be the turning point for our local economic recovery."

The Target distribution center is one of several projects expected to bring nearly 3,000 jobs to the region during the next five years.

Other companies with projects under way are Convergys, Covation, FedEx, Merchants Distributors Inc. and Williams-Sonoma.

Economic development officials welcome them all.

According to the Western Piedmont Council of Governments, since 2000, the region has lost 31,617 jobs, or 16 percent, a larger percentage than in any other metropolitan statistical area in the state.

"I believe the importance of the jobs being brought to our labor market area by Target are extremely important, not only for the numbers of jobs that will be filled, but also for the good news they bring in a down economy," said Allan Mackie, Employment Security Commission manager in Catawba County.

"Hopefully, their facility will continue to experience growth, thereby creating even more jobs as we move into the future."

Underwood, for one, is pinning her hopes on the distribution center.

"It's a big, stable company with great benefits," she said.

"I don't care what shift I get on as long as I get in the door."