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LIFE

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Job fair to help vets find work

By David DeMille

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ST. GEORGE — Hundreds of soldiers have returned to Southern Utah with the end of the war in Iraq, and some support organizations are aiming to help them find work.

The Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR), in conjunction with several other entities, has scheduled a Jan. 28 Employment and Benefits Fair at the Dixie Convention Center to help connect soldiers, reservists, veterans

IF YOU GO

An Employment and Benefits Fair is scheduled for Jan. 28 in St. George to help service men and women to find employment and other help reintegrating into society, and organizers are looking for employers who might be interested in attending. For information, visit www.esgr.com or contact the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve at (801) 432-4536.

and their spouses with employers. With members of the Utah National Guard's 2nd Battalion, 222nd Field Artillery and the 213th Forward Support Company coming home early after what was expected to be a longer deployment, there is a need, said Mark Harrison,

a program support specialist with ESGR.

"We knew when they were leaving that we were going to be faced with some unemployment problems when they got back, and of course things escalated when it was cut short," he said.

A survey of the 474

members of the 222nd indicated more than 125 would be interested in employment help, with many of those not having a job at all, Harrison said. Given that unemployment among National Guard members is thought to be about 14 percent in Utah — compared to 7 percent overall in the state — it makes sense that there would be many looking for work, he said.

A year ago the ESGR

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More than 140 soldiers from the Utah National Guard's 2nd Battalion 222nd Field Artillery Unit and 213th Forward Support Unit arrived at the Cedar City Airport on Dec. 8. KINA WILDE / THE SPECTRUM

Fireworks go on sale



Sue Byington with Acme Discount Fireworks gets help unloading fireworks from Gabriel Snodgrass on Sunset Boulevard and Dixie Drive on Tuesday. SAMANTHA CLEMENS / THE SPECTRUM

By Nur Kausar

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ST. GEORGE — The cold weather hasn't stopped tents from going up on parking lot corners to help residents celebrate the New Year with fireworks.

This is the first time Sue and Kim Byington have set up a tent in St.

George to sell fireworks, but the couple braved the Idaho cold for nearly 15 years selling sparklers, rockets and aerial devices before moving to Utah.

"I raised my kids doing fireworks, but we're just breaking into this area," Sue Byington said Tuesday as she set up her black and yellow tent outside Albertson's near the corner of Sunset

Boulevard and Dixie Drive. "I'm excited to see how it goes."

Though fireworks selling is "in her blood," Byington admits the restriction on sales to only certain days a year doesn't make the business very lucrative, and she's just doing it to help her

See FIREWORKS, Page A2

Consumer confidence index surges in December

By Anne D'innocenzio

AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK — Americans are gaining faith that the economy is on the upswing.

An improving job outlook helped the Consumer Confidence Index soar to the highest level since April and near a post-recession peak, according to a monthly survey by The Conference Board.

The second straight monthly surge coincided with a decent holiday shopping season for retailers, though stores had to heavily discount to attract shoppers.

The rise in confidence jibes with a better outlook for the overall economy. An Associated Press poll of three dozen private, corporate and academic economists projects U.S. economic growth will speed up in 2012, if it isn't derailed by upheavals in Europe.

But confidence is still far below where it is in a healthy economy. And Americans' mood could sour again if the debt crisis in Europe deepens and spreads to the U.S. Shoppers still face big obstacles — higher costs on household basics and a still-slumping housing market.

"This is encouraging. It's good to be talking about improvement," said Mark Vitner, an economist at Wells Fargo. "But there is still a lot of room for trouble."

The Conference Board, a private research group, said Tuesday that its Consumer Confidence Index rose almost 10 points to 64.5 in December, up from a revised 55.2 in

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Pragmatism in Iowa could benefit Mitt Romney

By Thomas Beaumont

Associated Press

MASON CITY, Iowa — Iowa Republicans may be starting to choose with their heads rather than their hearts as the Jan. 3 caucuses approach.

The ascent of libertarian-leaning Ron Paul and the lack of an ideologically pure consensus conservative seem to be awakening a new sense of pragmatism in some Iowa Republicans. That bodes well for Mitt Romney, as a large chunk of undecided voters continues the search for someone capable of defeating President Barack Obama.

"A lot of the people I'm around are not Romney fans,

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

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but they are kind of acknowledging they think he's going to be the nominee, and that they'll plug their nose and vote for him," said Gwen Ecklund, Republican chairwoman in GOP-heavy Crawford County in conservative western Iowa.

A week before voting begins in the fluid Republican race, interviews with a dozen Iowa

political operatives and party activists — as well as internal polling by rival campaigns — suggest that some Iowans are increasingly concerned about Paul, whose views often stray from GOP orthodoxy, and have begun to fall in line behind Romney instead of another candidate seen as more devoutly conservative but weaker against Obama.

Unlike Paul and his other opponents, there's room for Romney's support to grow. Public and private polling suggests he's more often the second choice of Republican caucusgoers than any other candidate,

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Chowder shop owner Evelyn Marconi greets Republican Presidential candidate, former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney during his visit to her place at lunch on Tuesday in Portsmouth, N.H. CHARLES KRUPA / AP

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Fireworks

Continued from A1

family from today through Jan. 1, when sales end until June 26 for a month in preparation for the Fourth of July.

"My husband and I always say we'll give it up, but we like the guy we work for, and I like to see people having fun," she said of the company, Acme Discount Fireworks.

When asked if fireworks have changed at all since the Byingtons started in the business, Sue Byington said with a laugh, "No, they're all the same, but with new packaging."

St. George Fire Department Deputy Chief Kevin Taylor said the rules are also the same for New Year's Eve with fireworks as they are for the Fourth of July. Since the city of St. George is not holding

its own fireworks show for the New Year, the fire department will have a regular crew working the weekend, Taylor added.

"We don't have any special areas you need to go to use them, but just make sure to buy them from a stand that is acceptable in Utah," Taylor said. "The smoke won't clear as fast as it does in summer, but that's (the only change in winter)."

According to the Utah State Fire Marshal website, fireworks can be shot off Dec. 31 and Jan. 1. Some aerial fireworks are lawful. Aerial devices, also known as "multiple tube," "repeater" or "cake" fireworks can be sold in the state, and can travel as high as 150 feet into the air.

Sue Byington said she is stocking "cakes," which have been the most popular among buyers.

A buyer must be at least 16 years of age to handle or light fireworks in Utah. Those explosives still outlawed include firecrackers, M-80, cherry bombs, bottle rockets, Roman candles, single or reloadable mortars and ground salutes, according to the fire marshal website.

For families not looking to buy their own fireworks, two free displays are set to take place in Southern Utah. Springdale, near Zion National Park, will host a fireworks display at 7 p.m. Saturday at Canyon Community Center, 126 Lion Blvd.

The Brian Head Torchlight Parade with skiers and snowboarders rushing down the mountain will begin at 6 p.m. Saturday at Brian Head Resort above Giant Steps Lodge, 329 S. State Route 143, followed by a fireworks display.



Sue Byington with Acme Discount Fireworks puts fireworks on display at the southwest corner of Sunset Boulevard and Dixie Drive on Tuesday. Fireworks are allowed to be used through January 1, 2012. SAMANTHA CLEMENS / THE SPECTRUM

Work

Continued from A1

started to focus more on helping to find new jobs for soldiers rather than just protecting those they already had, Harrison said, explaining that many of the soldiers are younger, without established careers when they sign up to serve in

the military.

Battalion Cmdr. Brad Fuller said it is a major priority to help his soldiers reintegrate into society. It is unlikely the battalion would be deployed again for at least three years, and probably more like five, he said, meaning the soldiers need to get back to jobs, school and pursuing their civilian lives.

"I think we started pushing on it in August and September, when we found out they might shut us down," he said. "We really want to make sure all the soldiers are OK."

Fuller said his soldiers should be attractive to employers, given the responsibility and dedication they had to show while in the service.

"I think a lot of these

kids, what they found out is how they have to support each other and be selfless," he said. "They also had to get their butts out of bed and get work."

Harrison said the goal is to get at least 50 employers to the job fair, adding that Southern Utah tends to show a lot of support in general to its service men and women. The ESGR is working with

chambers of commerce, the Department of Workforce Services and other agencies to try and attract as many businesses as possible, he said.

"We're pulling at the heartstrings of America to help these young soldiers out," he said.

The job fair is scheduled in conjunction with a Yellow Ribbon event at the same time, as

organizations work to help troops reintegrate into society in every way possible. A week earlier, a training session is scheduled to help soldiers with their resumes, interview skills and other skills that might help them gain employment.

"Anything we can do to help out these soldiers and their families," Harrison said.

Iowa

Continued from A1

indicating that Republicans could be swayed in the coming week to support him

over others.

Conversely, few see Paul, the ideological libertarian, as a substitute for their first choice of a hardline conservative. In a sign of Newt Gingrich's slide, Texas Gov.

Rick Perry — who is seeing a slight bump as the Iowa campaign nears its end — is more often identified as a second choice than is Gingrich.

"When you have a race this fluid, second choices, I think, if you have good surrogates standing up and making the pitch for you in the caucuses, you may be able to dislodge people from their first choice," said John Stineman, a West Des Moines Republican and former caucus campaign manager for Steve Forbes.

Public polls show that at least half of caucus-goers are undecided or could still change their mind, meaning Romney, the former Massachusetts governor whose Mormon faith and reversals on social issues have left influential Iowa Christian conservatives feeling skeptical, now has an opportunity to try to seal

the deal.

Mindful of that, Romney is entering the final phase of the Iowa campaign with a confident air — and a push to win the contest after trying to lower expectations. He spent heavily here in 2008 only to lose big.

Romney was launching a bus tour of Iowa Tuesday and starting to make his closing argument — essentially the same as his opening argument — that he is the strongest Republican to take on Obama on the No. 1 issue, the economy. Romney also was dispatching surrogates from nearby states, including South Dakota Sen. John Thune, former Minnesota Sen. Norm Coleman and former Missouri Sen. Jim Talent, to campaign in Iowa. His campaign also urged supporters during a conference call Monday to sign up to represent Romney at the caucuses — essentially

meetings of GOP activists in the state's 1,774 precincts — and to stand up to speak on behalf of the campaign.

Romney planned to spend four full days in the state, by far his longest trip in four years, to woo a fickle GOP electorate that hasn't settled on a front-runner.

Of all the candidates, only former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum has been denied a moment in the spotlight — even though he's scoured every corner of the state and, in recent days, has collected endorsements from key leaders in Iowa's influential social conservative movement. He urged more than 100 people in the ballroom of Mason City's historic Park Hotel on Tuesday to stick to their principles, saying: "We need this election to be about someone who is a conservative, and proud of it."

In a race with no shortage of leaders this year, Paul has been the latest to become a leading, non-establishment alternative to Romney. But the newfound status has brought new scrutiny over Paul's unorthodox, non-interventionist foreign policy views and statements that

appeared in newsletters he published in the early 1990s when he was not serving in Congress.

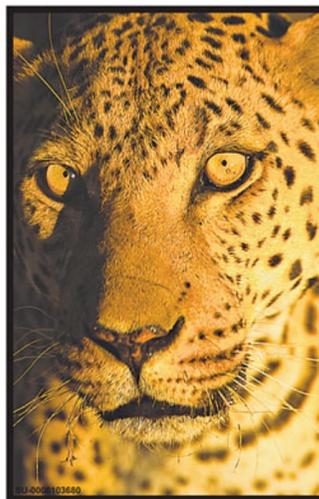
Among the statements: "Homosexuals, not to speak of the rest of society, were far better off when social pressure forced them to hide their activities." Another newsletter passage said "if you have ever been robbed by a black teen-aged male, you know how unbelievably fleet-footed they can be." Paul previously said such material was the work of ghostwriters, while acknowledging he bore "some moral responsibility" for it.

It's all enough to worry some Iowa Republicans that Paul could marginalize the caucuses' impact should he win.

"The moderate and establishment Republicans are scared Ron Paul is going to have a good showing. If he wins Iowa, it's going to diminish the clout Iowa has," said Mark Greenfield, chairman of the Hamilton County GOP who initially backed Perry but switched to Romney within the last two weeks, describing him as an "electable leader."

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November. Analysts had expected 59. The level is close to the post-recession high of 72, reached in February.

The December surge builds on a big increase in November, when the index rose almost 15 points from October. That month's reading was the lowest since March 2009, the depths of the recession.

One component of the index that measures how shoppers feel now about the economy rose to 46.7 from 38.3 in November. The other barometer, which measures how shoppers feel about the next six months, rose to 76.4 from 66.4.

In particular, shoppers' assessment of the job market improved, according to preliminary results of the survey conducted Dec. 1 through 14. Those anticipating more jobs in the months ahead increased to 13.3 percent from 12.4 percent while those anticipating fewer jobs declined to 20.2 percent from 23.8 percent.

Economists watch confidence numbers closely because consumer spending — including items like health care — accounts for about 70 percent of U.S. economic activity.

Americans have more reason to be optimistic. The economy has produced at least 100,000 new jobs for five months in a row, the longest such streak since 2006. The number of people applying for unemployment benefits has dropped to the lowest level since April 2008.

According to the AP poll of economists, conducted Dec. 14 through 20, the U.S. economy is expected to grow 2.4 percent next year. In 2011, it likely grew less than 2 percent.

"We're starting to make some progress," said Kathy St. Louis of Atlanta, who was picking up lunch Tuesday at CNN Center. "It could always be better, but we're trying to move in the right direction." She said she spent \$700 on holiday presents, up from the \$300 she spent last year, even though not much changed with her paralegal job.

Ahlum Beruk, 22, a Greenville, Miss., resident who was visiting Atlanta, was a student last year and worried about finding a job. This year she works for a hotel and spent about \$100 on Christmas presents. She spent nothing on gifts last year.

"I do feel better because I have a job now, and I didn't before," she added.

Shoppers still face many hurdles. In fact, while the job market is steadily improving, the unemployment rate is still high at 8.6 percent. And housing remains wobbly. The Standard & Poor's/Case-Shiller index of home prices, also released Tuesday, dropped in October in 19 of the 20 cities it tracks. It was a second straight declining month, further evidence of a bumpy housing recovery.

Lynn Franco, director of The Conference Board Consumer Research Center, noted renewed fears about a second recession hurt confidence last summer.

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