

The Tulsa area's jobless rate dipped to 7.4 percent in September, the same level as a year earlier, the Oklahoma Employment Security Commission reported Wednesday. September's rate was down from 7.7 percent in August, which was revised upward from a 7.6. percent preliminary reading. September's rate drop looks good, but "it would be great if it were accompanied by an increase in the labor force," said Bob Ball, economic research manager for the Tulsa Metro Chamber. The numbers point to an economy that remains in transition, he said, noting that the rate could tick up or down in the next month. The area is likely to see a mixed bag, with new jobs being filled while some people get laid off or leave the labor force, Ball said. Tulsa's rate has been at 7 percent or higher since May 2009, peaking at 8.1 percent in January and February. "Any time you're looking at unemployment rates for metro areas, keep two things in mind. You're looking at a data series that is not seasonally adjusted and a data series that is generated from a relatively small sample," said Russell Evans, director of the Center for Applied Economic Research with Oklahoma State University's Spears School of Business. Two separate surveys - a smaller one taken among households and a larger survey taken among business establishments - are used to measure the state's unemployment rate and determine its number of nonfarm jobs. Metro Tulsa is about where it was 12 months ago, with "no real significant deterioration or strengthening either way," Evans said. According to the smaller, household survey, the state saw a monthly drop of 780 jobs in total employment, which includes self-employed people and agricultural jobs. The seven-county metro area also saw its labor force - people working or looking for work - and its number of unemployed both drop in September. Tulsa's jobless rate remains higher than the state's other two metro areas. Oklahoma City's rate was 6.0 percent in September while Lawton's was 6.1 percent. Of the nation's 49 metros with a population of 1 million or more, Oklahoma City's jobless rate was the second lowest, topped only by Washington, D.C., at 5.9

percent, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Tulsa is about six to nine months behind Oklahoma City in the recovery, Evans said. While Oklahoma City is about 12,000 jobs below its 2008 level, Tulsa is down about 27,000, he said.

The difference between the Tulsa and Oklahoma City rates stems from the business makeup of the two, Evans said. Whereas Tulsa has a large entrepreneur and private sector base, Oklahoma has a large government base. "Whenever you go through a recession, the government sector jobs are the last ones to go," he said. The larger survey for Tulsa shows "a little more strength or a little less weakness," depending on how one wants to view it, Evans said. The larger survey taken among businesses shows that the area gained 1,100 nonfarm jobs over the month, giving it a nonfarm employment of 405,800. That figure, however, was down from 406,800 in September 2009.

"It may be that Tulsa's large business firms are getting back to hiring and that economic activity will lead to small business activity," Evans said, adding that he thinks Tulsa could see some strength at end of this year, and more strengthening in 2011. Among individual sectors, employment services were up by 1,100 jobs, or 9.2 percent, from September 2009. Manufacturing was unchanged from August and was down 200 jobs over the year. Things look as if they're beginning to turn, and in the fourth quarter the area could see more sustained evidence that it's pulling out of this recession, Ball said. Nationwide, unemployment rates were lower in September than a year earlier in 212 of the 372 metros, higher in 143 areas and unchanged in

17, the BLS reported. El Centro, Calif., recorded the highest rate at 30.4 percent,

while Bismarck, N.D., had the lowest at 2.8 percent. Laurie Winslow 581-8466 laurie.winslow@tulsaworld.com SUBH

The employment rate is at the same level as last September, and down 0.3 percent from August.