The number of jobs in Spokane County has trended upward during the second half of 2012 and so far this year, with a net gain of more than 3,000 new jobs, labor observers say.

“We’ve seen significant gains of people employed; it’s mostly private-sector jobs,” says Shawn P.L. Higgins, principal of Oxalis Group LLC, a Spokane consulting and marketing company.

For years, Higgins researched and provided Inland Northwest economic forecasts as former sales and marketing director for The Spokesman-Review, and he still tracks regional data. A measure he watches is whether the region is keeping pace with U.S. job creation since the 2008 economic downturn.

“I’m pretty happy with what I see,” Higgins adds. “We’re now had 25 months of gains, or at least no change in job lev- els from the previous year. We’re in an era of positive trending, and I expect that to continue.”

Meanwhile, Kootenai County showed a decline of 200 jobs from a year ago in the most recent data.

“Kootenai employment has kind of flattened out,” says Grant Forsyth, Avista Corp. chief economist who produces economic forecasts for Avista’s three-state service territory. “More recently, Spokane is doing better. Not too long ago, that was the other way around.”

In Spokane County, about 209,800 people held nonagricultural wage and salary jobs last April, up from about 206,200 in April 2012. On June 25, the Washington state Employment Security Department released preliminary May figures for Spokane County’s nonfarm industry employment, which aren’t seasonally adjusted, that suggest the trend is continuing.

The data show about 212,000 people were employed in May, compared with 208,700 a year ago. The county’s unemployment rate was at 7.8 percent in May, down from 8.7 percent a year ago but slightly higher than April’s 7.5 percent.

Doug Tweedy, Spokane County’s economic development official for the Washington state Employment Security Department, says job growth for the county accelerated through the second half of 2012 and so far this year. The jobs have come mainly in five industries, labeled professional-scientific-technical, financial services, manufacturing, transportation warehousing, and health care.

“I think the jobs will continue to grow because of the correction of unemployment that’s laid with the five growth industries,” Tweedy says. “I think it’s going to be a pretty consistent growth throughout the end of this year. I don’t see it spiking either way.”

Higgins says the entire region still has some ground to cover to catch up with job creation in the nation since the recession, though the gap has narrowed in the past two years. The U.S. is still down by about 2.1 million jobs, or about 1.5 percent, from where it was in 2008, he says.

Washington state is down about 2 percent, he adds. While the Couer d’Aime area, with about 53,300 people with jobs from this total in April 2008, has 6 percent from a 2008 level of 56,600, Spokane is down around 4.3 percent from its total in April 2008, when about 220,000 people were employed, Higgins says. He estimates that Spokane County is down by more than 9,000 jobs from a peak in 2008 prior to the economic downturn.

“Since 2010, we’ve picked up of all the jobs we’ve lost,” Higgins adds. “We have our work cut out for us to get the rest, but the direction is great.”

Tweedy contends that while the total number of jobs in Spokane hasn’t recovered as fast as the employment state-wide, “not all jobs are created equal.”

He says Spokane’s gains in professional employment or other leading industry-related jobs are providing a solid base.

“The jobs we’re creating are better paying, and they’re not so seasonal and temporary,” Tweedy says. “The Seattle area is creating more jobs, but the mix is some are in lower-paying, seasonal-type industries. (In Spokane) we’re building a good foundation.”

Additional employment gains are expected here in the long term, while lay-offs at companies have declined significantly, labor observers say.

Forsyth says he watches two leading indicators that can signal future employment, which are initial claims for unemployment insurance and residential building permits for both counties. Based on those, he expects employment growth to be in the 1 percent to 1.5 percent range for the next 12 to 15 months.

“So far, for the first five months of this year, employment growth looks like it’s just over 1 percent, a little bit better than last year, which was .9 percent,” Forsyth says.

He adds that potential speed bumps to job growth include impacts from Affordable Care Act health insurance requirements and from a potential increase in interest rates across the economy.

Meanwhile, temporary staffing company Humax Inc., of Spokane Valley, has had a spike so far this year in employer requests to fill certain positions, says company President Nancy Nelson.

“What we’re seeing is definitely an increase in the requests for support positions both from accounting and administration,” she says. “Many of those requests are coming from clients who have not added those positions over the last five or six years. They’ve just added to their workload.”

Nelson says the company’s revenue is up about 25 percent from a year ago.

Washington state employment data shows some Spokane County industries with an increase in jobs, such as in manufacturing, up 2 percent from April, professional and business services, up 3.2 percent, and general merchandise stores up 9 percent.

While hospital employment in the county declined by about 3 percent, most employment in the health care industry here showed growth.

Tweedy says health care reform organization likely is impacting hospital positions, as is a trend toward increased outpatient care. Meanwhile, manufacturing industry spots include food manufacturing, metal manufacturing, plastics and rubber products, aerospace and chemicals, he adds.

Another labor trend that’s back on the radar is an expected rise in the number of retiring employees ages 55 and older as their 401(k) retirement accounts have recouped earlier losses, Tweedy adds.

“It’s becoming a hot button for companies to do succession planning, making sure you have adequate labor with adequate skills for the jobs,” he says. “We know the retirement age is going up, but some jobs require physical abilities that you lose as you get older.”

Mark Martke, chief executive officer at the Spokane Area Workforce Development Council, says he expects that many new workers who are age 55 or older.

Now, he expects employee replacement planning to accelerate because the recovery has taken hold, retirement accounts are recovering in value, and job growth is occurring.

Martke says that certain industries and job categories here are more vulnerable because of the percentage of workers who are age 55 or older.

The companies retained the longer-term workers who didn’t want to lose because their 401(k)s were losing value. Companies needed those valued employees, and there was less attrition.

“Now, he expects employee replacement planning to accelerate because the recovery has taken hold, retirement accounts are recovering in value, and job growth is occurring.

Martke says that certain industries and job categories here are more vulnerable because of the percentage of workers who are age 55 or older.

The companies retained the longer-term workers who didn’t want to lose because their 401(k)s were losing value. Companies needed those valued employees, and there was less attrition.

“Now, he expects employee replacement planning to accelerate because the recovery has taken hold, retirement accounts are recovering in value, and job growth is occurring.

Martke says that certain industries and job categories here are more vulnerable because of the percentage of workers who are age 55 or older.

The companies retained the longer-term workers who didn’t want to lose because their 401(k)s were losing value. Companies needed those valued employees, and there was less attrition.

“Now, he expects employee replacement planning to accelerate because the recovery has taken hold, retirement accounts are recovering in value, and job growth is occurring.

Martke says that certain industries and job categories here are more vulnerable because of the percentage of workers who are age 55 or older.

The companies retained the longer-term workers who didn’t want to lose because their 401(k)s were losing value. Companies needed those valued employees, and there was less attrition.

“Now, he expects employee replacement planning to accelerate because the recovery has taken hold, retirement accounts are recovering in value, and job growth is occurring.

Martke says that certain industries and job categories here are more vulnerable because of the percentage of workers who are age 55 or older.

The companies retained the longer-term workers who didn’t want to lose because their 401(k)s were losing value. Companies needed those valued employees, and there was less attrition.