

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

This story ran in the Pittsburgh Tribune Review on Monday, March 12, 2007. It is available with permission from the Pittsburgh Tribune Review.

Graying likely to cost green

By Justin Vellucci
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Monday, March 12, 2007

The men who control the river depths around Pittsburgh's Golden Triangle haven't aged any slower than the 85-year-old Emsworth dam where they work.

But they have aged better.

At 45, Fred Sasinoski has no problem working in biting cold as he wrestles debris or ice from the Ohio River dam's 600-foot-long lock chamber.

"It keeps me healthy," said Sasinoski, a Cheswick resident who has worked for nearly 20 years with the Army Corps of Engineers. "Hopefully, we can get some younger guys in here to do the climbing, and I can sit up top with the radio, saying, 'It's on your left!'"

He soon might get his wish.

In 2008, America's oldest baby boomers turn 62 and can start collecting Social Security benefits. Within 10 years, 60 percent of the federal civilian work force becomes eligible for retirement. That's almost two-thirds of 2 million workers, a group that includes about 100,000 people in Pennsylvania and 20,000 in the Pittsburgh area.

"What you see in the federal government is a more magnified version of what you'll see elsewhere," said Sara Rix, an AARP strategic policy adviser, who declined to give her age. "People (are) hitting 60, 62 and saying, 'What should I do?'"

Their answers could have far-reaching implications.

The Social Security Administration estimates the number of retirees will double in less than 30 years, and by 2017 the government won't collect enough tax dollars from workers to cover Social Security benefits. Industries filled with older workers -- such as Southwestern Pennsylvania coal miners, 68 percent of whom are 45 or older -- will grapple with turnover.

Some say the cost of training new public employees might erase taxpayer savings netted from the retirement of higher-paid superiors.

On the bright side, analysts stress the wave of pending retirements will create job openings and encourage companies to analyze how diverse new hires would shape their businesses. Firms could tackle some of these issues by bringing back retirees, which Westinghouse has done locally to address a

growing demand for nuclear technology. Retirees also could serve as part-time consultants.

"I think you will see some pretty inventive and pretty innovative ways to capture that experience that retiring workers have," said Three Rivers Workforce Investment Board CEO Ron Painter, who declined to provide his age.

"I think it's been on the minds of companies for a while," said Angela Arrington, 45, director of Duquesne University's Center for Corporate and Executive Education. "But the time is happening right now."

Nearly 58,000 federal employees retired in fiscal 2006, according to the Office of Personnel Management. About 60,000 to 65,000 federal workers are expected to retire each year through 2010. Personnel Management Director Linda M. Springer said her agency is counterbalancing the exodus by stepping up college recruitment, beginning marketing campaigns and bulking up the Web site www.USAJobs.gov.

"We have to find ways to attract talent," said Springer, 51. "There's nothing different about the federal work force, in this respect, from the private sector. It's a worldwide phenomenon, where the baby boom talent pool is reaching that retirement age and all of us are going to have to go out into the market to attract people to fill those positions."

Some federal workers can take early retirement -- at age 50 with 20 years of service and at any age with 25 years of service, among a host of options.

The Office of Personnel Management says it cannot estimate the government's cost of preparing for the wave of baby boom retirements. Neither can the Army Corps of Engineer's Pittsburgh district, whose 555 employees have an average age of 49, four years older than the federal work force average. The median age in greater Pittsburgh in 2005 was 41.7, five years above the national median.

"Overall, it's not a cost thing. It's a 'maintaining a quality work force' issue," said Pittsburgh district spokeswoman Karen L. Auer, 48. "People in the community should be looking at it as (an) opportunity."

That was a sentiment echoed in the Postal Service's Pittsburgh District, whose 7,099 employees have an average age of 48.8.

"I can't really read the future, I just don't do that, but ... we have opportunities for people to fill ranks," said spokesman Tad Kelley, 45, whose postal career started 20 years ago as a letter carrier. "There is basically every walk of life in this organization. Every kind of job you see in the private sector, you will find in the public sector, especially in the Postal Service."

Federal officials hope that range of opportunities -- coupled with pension plans, insurance coverage and paid vacations -- attracts a new generation of civil servants such as Don Zeiler, acting lockmaster at Emsworth Locks and Dams.

"I think the government in general, when somebody gets in, it's really good positions, really good jobs," said Zeiler, 47, of North Huntingdon, Westmoreland County, a 26-year government employee eligible to retire in nine years.

"They take good care of their people ... and the Corps wants its people to be good at what they do," Zeiler said. "I wouldn't want to work anywhere else."

Justin Vellucci can be reached at jvellucci@tribweb.com or 412-320-7847.