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## **\$1.5M pledged for jobs**

**By Trevor Jones**

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PITTSFIELD — With \$1.5 million of investments in potential job growth, two local businessmen are banking on the Berkshires.

Allen Harris, president and chief investment officer for Berkshire Money Management, and Sherman Baldwin, founder and host of the “Talk Berkshires” radio program, are in the process of recruiting employers for a Berkshire Job Summit, to be held Feb. 19 at the Crowne Plaza, with the intention of getting local employers hiring again.

“Amid this great crisis, we’re trying to forge great opportunity,” said Harris, who is seeking to invest \$1 million in equity into companies willing to hire.

Baldwin is spending \$ 500,000 in marketing and promotion for the summit, which they believe could lead to the creation of 2,000 local jobs over the next five years.

Harris, who studies trends in economic recessions and growth for a living, expects hiring to pick up in middle to late 2010. Having the Berkshires ahead of the curve, he said, would allow businesses to get high-quality employees that would otherwise find jobs in different markets, and get them at lower pay due to the dearth of job openings. “If we can start now, we can go ahead and compete with our regional competitors,” he said.

The summit will not be like a typical job fair, where booths are set up to find employment. Instead, Harris and Baldwin hope to have the top 50 employers in the county - whose stake in the area’s economic vitality already exists - come together to discuss the best ways to end hiring freezes.

Beyond their own investments, Baldwin and Harris said for this summit will require investment of federal, state and local dollars. So, the men have invited national heavy-hitters in the public and private sectors to attend the summit, including U.S. Sen. John Kerry, U.S. Secretary of Commerce Gary Locke and Thomas J. Donohue, president and CEO of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

Unemployment in the county rose from 7.7 percent to 7.9 percent in November. And while national indicators show signs of recovery, companies are still not hiring over fears that a full recovery is not imminent, according to Harris.

That sentiment needs to change, he said, as he believes a recovery is coming in spite of those fears.

“People tend to say, ‘This time is different,’” said Baldwin. “It’s never different.”

And beyond just the jobs they hope to create, this summit could be a boon for the entire economy of the Berkshires, Sherman said.

“It has so much more legs than just providing a paycheck and providing for a family,” said Sherman. “[That money] is spent over and over in the community.”

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