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Economy improves in first quarter

By Jeannine Aversa  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — U.S. productivity improved in the first three months of 2003, increasing at an annual rate of 1.6 percent as companies produced more while they kept work forces lean.

The gain in productivity posted in the January to March quarter was more than twice the size of the 0.7 percent growth rate registered in the previous quarter, the Labor Department reported Thursday.

Productivity in the first quarter wasn't as strong as the 2 percent growth rate economists were forecasting.

New claims for unemployment benefits dropped last week by a seasonally adjusted 13,000 to 448,000, the department said. Even with the decline, claims clocked in at their second-highest level of this year.

In other economic news Thursday, manufacturing failed to pick up in April, with activity falling for the second straight month. Manufacturing has been the weakest link in the national economy's ability to get back to full health.

The Institute for Supply Management's manufacturing index fell to 45.4 last month,

slipping from 46.2 in March. A reading below 50 means manufacturing activity is contracting; above 50 indicates the industry is more busy or growing. Economists were expecting a reading of 47 for April.

And, construction spending declined by 1 percent in March, the largest drop in seven months, the Commerce Department reported. Much of the weakness came from a decrease in spending on big government projects, such as highways and schools. Spending on commercial ventures, such as office buildings, by private builders also was lackluster. Economists were predicting a small rise in overall construction spending.

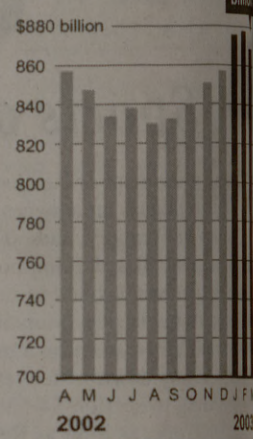
The latest batch of economic reports pushed stocks lower. The Dow Jones industrial average lost 89.5 points and the Nasdaq was off 4 points in early afternoon trading.

For 11 straight weeks, jobless claims have been above the 400,000 mark, a level associated with a weak labor climate. The level of claims last week were higher than economists were expecting.

The more stable, four-week moving average of jobless claims, which smooths out weekly fluctuations, went up last week by 1,250 to 442,000.

Construction spending

Here is a look at monthly construction spending. Seasonally adjusted



SOURCE: Department of Commerce

That marked the highest level just over a year.

"The persistent high level of new claims for unemployment insurance suggests that firms may still be finding it possible to meet their customers' increases in demand with a larger work force," Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan said Wednesday, when he provided House lawmakers with an updated picture on the economy's recovery.

Gay rights cases increasing steadily

By Anne Gearan  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Legal cases involving the rights and treatment of gay people are on the increase, Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor said Thursday, suggesting a major new focus for the nation's courts in the 21st century.

Asked to predict what issue might define the work of the Supreme Court in the 21st century, O'Connor said cases "relating to how homosexuals are treated legally" are one possibility.

"We see a lot of these," O'Connor said.

She did not mention a major gay rights case now before the high court. The court is considering whether states such as Texas may ban acts between homosexuals that are legal for heterosexuals.

At the same time, the Supreme Court is dealing with the legacy of race, an issue that occupied the courts for much of the 20th century, O'Connor told high school students.

"I don't know that we've solved everything on the race issue yet," O'Connor said. "We haven't know we haven't, because we have cases at the court this term dealing with affirmative action in higher education."

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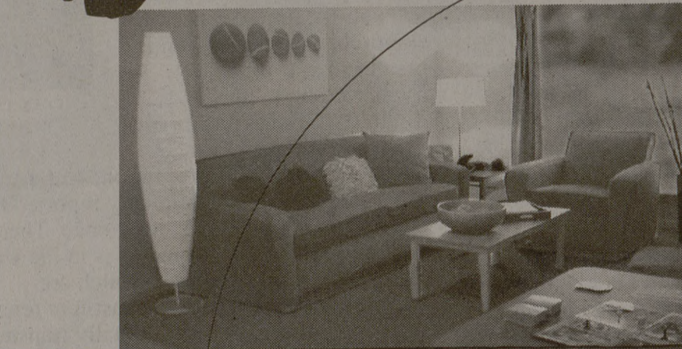
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By Samee THE ASSOC

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