It's rough in part because the so-called "full-employment unemployment rate" is higher than it used to be. That rate indicates what the base level of unemployment is when the economy can provide a job for everyone who wants one at the prevailing wage.

Have you noticed that a lot of the fast food restaurants are coming up with various combinations to save you money? McDonalds has the $3,4,5 dollar meals. Quiznos has the same thing. They just say it backwards, $5,4,3.

Basically, the economy has everyone competing for your business.

The fast-food giants have been holding up better than many other industries and certainly better than any in the restaurant sector. But, even they are beginning to suffer from the downturn. The struggle to recover from the recent downturn in the nation's economy has led to rising tensions between several major fast-food chains and their respective franchisees.

Franchisors like McDonald's and Burger King are working to rebuild flagging sales through new evaluation systems and renovation plans. Many franchisees are finding themselves pressured to accept new and often costly programs at a time when funds are increasingly difficult to acquire.

I use to always say McDonalds branded themselves as the kid's drawing card. I use to see parent's with their kids come by a Burger King and McDonalds and hear the kids say I want to go to McDonalds. Maybe because their hands were too small to handle a whopper with both hands (smile).

A lot of the fast food restaurants have been promoting their breakfast menu as well and, with all the health stories, breakfast is a hot ticket for them. However, with millions of people out of work, it has scared shoppers away from stores and threatened the economic recovery. So, it's taking a bite out of breakfast.

Breakfast sales had grown at a ravenous pace during the boom years as busy workers could eat a sausage biscuit on the way to the office, fueling a $57 billion business and accounting for as much as a quarter of sales at some fast-food chains. Chains opened earlier and expanded their morning menus to accommodate the traffic as lunch and dinner sales had dropped off.

Let's be real. If you're unemployed, you're not getting up at six and going through the drive-thru. For one, you're not spending money you don't have. The decline of jobs is also part of the broader trend of Americans eating more meals at home because of tough economic times.

McDonald's introduced a breakfast version of its popular dollar menu last month, featuring five items: a sausage burrito, sausage McMuffin, sausage biscuit, hash browns and coffee. The $1 breakfast menu was designed to give the chain "a strong national voice" on the meal at a time when customers are concerned about value.

Restaurant chain Denny's gave away about 2 million free Grand Slam breakfasts recently in a nod to the tough economy, particularly for the 44 percent of its customers who make less than $45,000. The company said breakfast sales held steady while dinner and late-night dining drove down sales, by 7 percent in the third quarter, at established locations.

Despite discounts, fast-food chains protected profit margins in 2009 by cutting costs and taking advantage of lower commodity prices. But, with many possible cuts already taken, its likely commodity prices may be rising.

President Obama made Five Guys Burgers and Fries a household name during a visit last year to a DC area location, as a diligent journalist reported that he ordered a cheeseburger with lettuce, tomato, jalapeno peppers and mustard.

To eat one of these sandwiches for the first time gave me a new passion and love for the hamburger. My visit to Five Guys changed my entire view on their restaurant and what we should expect from every restaurant we visit.

So with all the food wars, and airline price wars, the question still stands… what can we do to help boost the economy? Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke said extending the tax cuts enacted during President George W. Bush's administration could provide a boost to the economy. Bernanke said while the tax cuts would help, lawmakers need to find a way to offset them.

"In the longer term, I think we need to be taking steps to reassure the American people and the markets that our fiscal situation is going to be well-controlled." House Financial Services ranking member Spencer Bachus (R-Ala.) asked Bernanke. He also asked if offsetting an extension would require taxes to be raised or spending to be cut.

"The arithmetic is very clear. To get the deficit down, you have to have either more revenues, less spending, or both," Bernanke said.

It's rough in part because the so-called "full-employment unemployment rate" is higher than it used to be. That rate indicates what the base level of unemployment is when the economy can provide a job for everyone who wants one at the prevailing wage.

The rate used to be in the neighborhood of 4.75 percent. Now, the Federal Reserve's view for long-term unemployment after 2013 is as high as 5.3 percent.

The Senate passed major financial reforms, in a 60-39 vote, Thursday, sending the legislation intended to overhaul the regulatory system. The question that remains is whether it will help prevent future financial crises – and whether it can achieve that objective without curtailing the flow of credit that will be vital to economic recovery.

Many finance experts say that, on balance, the bill is a step forward. But they add that it doesn't eliminate the risk of a new crisis or the prospect that large banks could reap bailouts during such an emergency.

The Senate's vote came after a year of back and forth in Washington over how to safeguard the nation from the sharp economic decline in 2008, causing double digit unemployment. Joblessness surged even in communities that had not seen a housing bubble or a foreclosure wave.

Democratic backers of the legislation argued that what's hampering the economy, now, are the lingering effects of the 2008 financial shock, not uncertainty about heightened regulation. They say tighter oversight of finance needed to revive shaken confidence in US markets.

, or e-mail him at jwade@call-post.com. Comments and questions are welcome but, because of the volume of mail, personal responses are not always possible. Please note that comments or questions may be used in a future column.