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Friday, Jan 23, 2009

Posted on Sun, Jan. 18, 2009

As other cities struggle in down economy, Mansfield holds its own

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Special to the Star-Telegram

MANSFIELD — Since the Texas Roadhouse restaurant opened 13 months ago, its staff has been too busy churning out plates of steaks and ribs to notice the area's declining economy.

"I know people are watching what they spend, so on the days when it's slow, we kind of understand," said Kelly Nicholls, the eatery's service manager. "But business has been really good."

And that adds up to good business for Mansfield.

While many Tarrant County cities are talking about cutting jobs and services to cope with declining sales tax revenues, Mansfield's economy — though not as strong as it was — continues to grow.

According to the latest state comptroller figures, Mansfield's commercial and retail engine generated \$1,096,400 in sales taxes in November, a 5 percent increase over receipts in November 2007.

Sales taxes in October 2008 were 19 percent higher than in the previous October.

Picking up the slack

Mansfield isn't immune to the economy's ups and downs. Housing development has dropped sharply over the past couple of years, but commercial development has more than picked up the slack.

Officials point to major tax contributors that opened in the past year — Big League Dreams Sports Park, Hawaiian Falls water park and four hotels, plus several medical and other businesses attracted by Methodist Mansfield Medical Center, which opened in December 2006.

City Manager Clayton Chandler credits a shift in the city's thinking about business recruitment. The city had provided tax incentives solely for industrial development.

Then, several years ago, the city began using those subsidies to build roads, utilities and other infrastructure to areas planned for major retail projects.

"There was a deliberate effort a few years ago to become a destination point, to recognize that this area of the Metroplex was underserved in many ways," Chandler said.

'Shop Local'

In November, the city started promoting its "Shop Local" campaign, involving posters for store windows, newspaper advertisements and space on city kiosks to champion the concept of hometown spending.

"It's a public education campaign, just so residents know the impact their shopping decisions have on the city," city spokeswoman Belinda Willis said.

Sales taxes help fund the general city budget as well as business recruitment and park projects.

The special half-cent sales tax administered by the Mansfield Economic Development Corp. has generated \$21.9 million since the tax was approved in 1997.

The half-cent sales tax for the Park Facilities Development Corp. has accrued \$30.4 million since its inception in 1992.

Mansfield Councilman Mike Leyman said the city is realistic about the future.

"You don't want to get too excited about this, because we're just scratching the surface," Leyman said.

"We don't know if a year from now all of this will be continuing. We hope and pray that it will."