

Friday, Jan. 09, 2009

City's economic forecast strong

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For the News-Mirror

Bailouts, soaring unemployment and a topsy-turvy stock market notwithstanding, the economic future for Mansfield looks bright when compared to the immediate outlook for the rest of the country.

"These are scary times, but we remain optimistic," said Scott Welmaker, director of economic development for the city of Mansfield. "We may hit a bump in the road, but overall things will continue to grow."

One significant indicator of a healthy local economy is the community's sales tax revenue, which saw an increase in 2008 despite a nationwide drop in consumer spending.

"A lot of that has to do with the fact that several new retail venues have come online recently," said Welmaker.

For example: national retailers Bed, Bath & Beyond, Dots, PetSmart and Sports Authority all planted stores in Mansfield in 2008. The City by Circuit City did, too; however, the store officially closed less than eight weeks after celebrating a grand opening. The Mansfield store was one of 155 Circuit City stores closed nationwide the same day.

"Circuit City caught us off guard, but you're always going to have businesses open and close during any year, good or bad," Welmaker said.

"We've been very pleased, although cautiously so, to see our sales tax revenues are continuing to grow," he said. "We're hoping that will continue even if it grows at a slower rate."

One factor influencing retail success in Mansfield may be the city's "Shop Mansfield" campaign, which encourages Mansfield residents to buy within city limits.

"We're not certain exactly what effect it is having, but I am hearing people talk about it," said Welmaker.

According to Tom Eastman, chairman of the board of directors of the Mansfield Area Chamber of Commerce, another factor contributing to the increased sales tax revenue may be the extra cash that has recently been infused into the community in the form of Barnett Shale royalty payments.

"A big saving grace was the Barnett Shale," said Eastman. "It helped people have more disposable income.

"If energy costs stay down, that will help (retail sales), too," he said. "People can easily travel in and outside of Mansfield."

Mansfield retailer Melissa Wimberly, who owns Aspirations, said that she is feeling hopeful about the outlook for 2009.

"October was by far the toughest month," she said. "I think that everybody was in a holding pattern waiting for the election and for interest rates to go down. November was much better, and December has really picked up."

Aspirations, which opened in September, is one of Mansfield's few boutique-styled shopping destinations. Wimberly sells new and gently-used home décor and gift items; she also offers private interior design consultation services.

Recently, she partnered with The Attic, a Los Angeles-styled boutique selling premium denim, footwear and other apparel. The Attic operates out of one side of Wimberly's store.

Wimberly said that she has noticed that her patrons tend to shop carefully these days.

"It's easy to put them at a price point and find out how much they want to spend," she said. "I think that people are more cost-conscious and are doing more comparative shopping."

Debbie Koennecke, the chairman-elect of the board of directors of the Mansfield Area Chamber of Commerce, said that Mansfield merchants like Wimberly can help themselves stay successful by getting involved in chamber activities.

"When times are challenging, you need to be able to network," she said. "We have programs at our monthly luncheons that help our members address the challenges of the business world."

Other positive indicators for next year's local economy are trends in commercial and residential development.

"In this last year, a lot of the residential subdivisions have reached build out," said Welmaker. "We've seen a number of commercial projects reach fruition, including a lot of hotels."

Welmaker said that seven Mansfield hotels are now open, up from the one local hotel that existed at the beginning of 2008.

"The medical district brings in a lot of hotel guests and so does Big League Dreams," he said.

Big League Dreams, a national recreational sports facility chain, and Hawaiian Falls, a water park, both opened locations in Mansfield in the spring of 2008.

"A lot of projects that started in the last few years have come online," said Welmaker.

According to the Web site for the Mansfield Economic Development Corporation, the commercial development arm of the city of Mansfield, approximately 40 percent of Mansfield's total land area is currently undeveloped.

Welmaker said that although some parts of the country are experiencing a "complete stoppage" of development, he thinks that development in Mansfield will slow but not stop altogether.

"I'm seeing lots of preparation in play for the next growth cycle, in terms of getting infrastructure into place," he said. "Developers are coming in and requesting TIF assistance. (TIF stands for "tax increment financing," a popular public financing method). "I'm seeing a significant amount of residential growth plans.

"Developers are gearing up to be ready to sell lots (when the market comes back)," he said.

Welmaker said that three commercial developments along the Texas 360 corridor are likely to materialize in 2009, although he declined to offer details about the developers or their potential tenants.

"There was recently a tremendous amount of growth along the 287 corridor," he said. "That growth has now shifted slightly to the east, due to growth in that part of Mansfield and in Grand Prairie.

"I'm encouraged to see that we still have a lot of interest, that I'm still meeting with developers," said Welmaker. "We can make a cold call and (learn that) they have done their homework and are interested in making a capital commitment to the city."