

## Local economy survives '09

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By STEPHANIE HORNBACK

Last year was tough for the economy nationwide, and Nelson County was not exempt from the hardships. Layoffs, closings and high unemployment were concerns throughout 2009. In November, the last month for which data is available, Nelson County's unemployment rate was 11 percent, 3.1 percent higher than November 2008.

But there were some bright spots — namely SYKES Enterprises and Flowers Baking Co. of Kentucky.

“That had the largest impact on the community and on people as far as putting so many people back to work,” Kim Huston, Nelson County Economic Development Agency president, said.

The \$52 million, 197,000-square-foot Bardstown Flowers Foods facility on Parkway Drive opened in June with 65 employees. That number is now up to 121, Huston said, and will grow early this year when the bakery's new bun line begins operating.

SYKES Enterprises employs even more — 323 now, with another 120 soon coming on board, Huston said. The Bardstown branch of the company, at Kentucky Home Square, takes calls for AT&T.

Flowers and SYKES helped deflect the blow from layoffs by American Greetings and Mitsuba Bardstown Inc. and the closing of Intertec, which located in Bardstown in 1987 and employed about 140.

“(Intertec) put so many people that had been working for decades out there, since the day they opened, out of a job,” Huston said. SYKES, Flowers and local expansions put some of them back to work, but some had to go out of town to find a job, Huston said.

Also of note on the local economy scene in 2009, Constellations Brands sold the Tom Moore Distillery and bottling facility in Bardstown to Sazerac of New Orleans.

Plans were also close to being finalized for the Bardstown Streetscape project, which is expected to begin in the spring. Streetscape is aimed at making downtown more attractive and safer. Phase I will involve North Third Street from Broadway Avenue to Court Square. Phase II will involve Court Square and the 100 blocks of West and East Stephen Foster Avenue. The city received \$2.5 million in Transportation Enhancement Funds from the state Department of Transportation, and Gov. Steve Beshear was in town in November 2009 to present a \$1.9 million check for the project.

Huston said the goal for Streetscape will be to keep downtown businesses open and accessible. Plans are in the works for doing just that, she said.

As for 2010, Huston predicts most economic activity locally will come from expansions of existing businesses, although she did meet with an out-of-state client Wednesday and will see another Monday who are considering Bardstown. Huston said confidence in the economy seems to be improving and banks are loosening up somewhat on giving loans.

## Tourism continues growing

Despite the nationwide economic downturn in 2009, Bardstown-Nelson County tourism remained strong, with revenue growth over 2008 and increased attendance at eight attractions.

The Bardstown-Nelson County Tourism Commission reported a 4.6 percent increase in restaurants and motel tax revenues for 2009, according to Kim Huston, Nelson County Economic Development Agency president.

That's especially impressive considering tourism in similar markets took a hit during the recession, said Dawn Przystal, vice president of tourism expansion and marketing for the Tourist Commission. She said a recent presentation from Randal Travel Marketing, which specializes in tourism research, indicated that anything less than -10 percent losses was the new flat.

"The fact that we not only avoided that sharp decline but posted increases is a testament to the strength of our tourism industry and partners," Przystal said.

Increased attendance at several area attractions fed the increase. My Old Kentucky Home, the Oscar Getz Museum of Whiskey History, Kentucky Railway Museum, "Stephen Foster — The Musical," Maker's Mark, the Heaven Hill Bourbon Heritage Center, Wickland and Tom Moore Distillery drew more visitors in 2009 than 2008.

Attendance at the Kentucky Bourbon Festival was down, 45,000 compared to 55,000 the previous year. Wet weather was to blame. The festival had success introducing a new event, however — the Kentucky All Star Sampler featuring the Master Distillers.

Other tourism success in 2009 included Bardstown Tourism's role in forming "Team Bourbon," a partnership of 11 tourism entities that joined to promote the Kentucky Bourbon experience, Huston said. Bardstown also hosted the 85th anniversary celebration of Kentucky State Parks at My Old Kentucky Home State Park. And benefiting Nelson and adjoining counties, the route along U.S. 31E from Hodgenville to Bardstown, then U.S. 150 from Bardstown to Danville, was dubbed the Lincoln Heritage Highway and designated a National Scenic Byway by the National Scenic Byways Program, a part of the U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration. The byways are promoted nationally.

Also last year, the Tourist Commission distributed \$35,500 in grants to 12 recipients in Bardstown, New Haven, Bloomfield and Fairfield — the Kentucky Railway Museum, Stephen Foster Drama Association, Friends of Wickland, Kentucky Bourbon Festival, Old Bardstown Village/Civil War Museum, Bardstown Home Guard, Downtown Bardstown Promotion, Northeast Nelson Community Development Association, Bardstown Historical Development Corp., Fine Arts Bardstown Society, Bardstown Main Street Program and the City of Fairfield.

The Bardstown-Nelson County Tourist and Convention Commission, funded by the local restaurant/hotel tax, has distributed more than \$685,000 since 1988, Przystal said. The tax — 1 percent on restaurants and 3 percent on hotels and motels — went into effect in 1973.

For 2010, Przystal said the general forecast is that tourism movement from -5 percent to 2 percent will be the norm, so there are still a few tough years ahead.

"With that in mind we will continue to evaluate our media mix and promotions to look for ways to compete and further grow the industry," she said.