

Local economy holding its own

By Ashleigh Viveiros

As the global economic crisis takes its toll on the Canadian economy, Winkler's business community is in a pretty good position to weather the storm.

"They're having some challenges right now, but they are being proactive," Ken Thomas, president of the Winkler and District Chamber of Commerce, said recently of local retailers and manufacturers.

"During these times, businesses tend to look at streamlining, finding ways to be more efficient, and looking for new markets," he said. "That's typically not a bad thing."

Given the scope of the global financial situation, Thomas said it would be unrealistic to think Winkler would remain wholly unaffected by the economic downturn.

"But we're well-positioned to minimize any effects," he said, pointing to the city's well-established business community. "Eighty-four per cent of our businesses have been around for ten plus years, so they've been through the various economic cycles before."

A further 44 per cent of businesses surveyed recently by the Chamber plan to expand their operations within the next couple of years, Thomas said.

"We don't expect that to change," he said, admitting, however, the scale of the expansions may be smaller than originally anticipated if the economy doesn't bounce back soon.

Looking forward, Thomas anticipates next summer will be a booming time for tourism in the region, especially if people are still hesitant to spend money on more expensive vacations.

"I think there's going to be some great opportunities for tourism," he said. "There are a lot of places and things to see and do during day trips to the Pembina Valley."

Thomas said many business owners remain optimistic about the future, but worry that customers are putting too much stock in the doomsday stories circulating in the media.

“They are concerned people are paying too much attention to the news stories and not enough focusing on the big picture,” he said. “There’s so much information overload ... we’ve just got to get people to calm down a little bit.” “Despite what’s going on right now, there was just a grand opening in town,” Thomas said, referring to the opening of M&M Meat Shops in late November. “So it’s important to keep what we’re hearing in context - definitely pay attention to what’s going on but look at it from a different perspective.”

Thomas says area residents can do their part to help the Winkler economy stay strong by shopping locally.

“Pretty much anything you can buy in Winnipeg, if they don’t have it here, they can get it,” said Thomas.

Winkler retailers, meanwhile, should seek out the opportunities that remain in the marketplace today.

“Because of the local work ethic, the entrepreneurial spirit, what’s going to work well for us, as it has in the past, is to see the opportunities out there,” said Thomas. “Think outside the box and you will grow.”

‘PEOPLE ARE SPENDING’

In the meantime, if people are upset about the state of the economy, they’re not letting it stop them from going all-out with their holiday shopping, according to at least one long-time Winkler retailer.

Solutions’ Dennis Kehler says the store’s electronics department is having a record sales year when it comes to big-ticket items.

“People are spending money this season,” he said. “We are finding that spending on luxury items has not slowed down.”

Kehler attributes the continued sales to the fact that the effects of the flagging economy hasn’t had much of an impact here yet.

“I believe that the impact of what is occurring nationally and globally now will affect our region less severely, but perhaps more long term than in other market areas,” he said. “Our region tends to be less dramatic in the marketplace swings that others experience.”

“In my opinion, there is definitely some optimism, or perhaps to be more realistic, a general unwillingness to overreact,” Kehler said of the prevailing viewpoint among Winkler businesses.

Kehler admits continued insecurity in the local manufacturing sector will have a “trickle down effect” on the community-at-large.

“People spend less money when their jobs are less secure,” he said.

However, like Thomas, Kehler thinks the business community is up to the challenge.

“Businesses need to examine their options, and do what makes sense for them,” he said. “In some cases, some risks need to be taken, in others, costs need to be slashed, to be able to wait it out.”

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