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youths compete
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SOME BUSINESSES DO WELL DURING TROUBLED ECONOMIC TIMES



Photos by DEVON RAVINE | Daily News

WHAT RECESSION?

By **THOMAS J. MONIGAN**
and **WENDY VICTORA**
Northwest Florida Daily News

As a recession closes in on Northwest Florida, empty storefronts are becoming an increasingly common part of the landscape.

But while some businesses fail, others find a foothold during tough times.

Dollar stores, large discount retailers and folks who offer needed services at competitive prices survive and even thrive, a local economic expert said.

"The rule of thumb is if you are providing what customers see as good value for their money and you're a well-managed firm, then you're going to do OK," said Rick Harper, director of the Haas Center for Business

Research and Economic Development at the University of West Florida.

He said the area should begin to see signs of recovery by the second half of this year.

Until then, used cars and boats will sell better than new ones. Pawn shops will do a brisk business. And bankruptcies will continue to rise.

"If you're a buyer with ready cash and need something, then it's a great time to be purchasing," Harper said. "But it's a lousy time to be looking for new customers or selling things because people are generally cutting back."

Some people have had to do more than cut back. And that has led to a surge for some businesses.

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At top, Roy Majors, owner of Jimmy's Pawn Shop on Eglin Parkway in Fort Walton Beach, says sales of safes have increased 40 to 50 percent recently. **Above,** Majors attributes a recent jump in firearm sales in part to increased anxiety over the economy and a fear of future gun-control legislation. **At left,** Fort Walton Beach attorney Tracy Strom holds open one of four drawers filled with bankruptcy filings. "Right now, it's at least half of my business," said Strom, who has seen a dramatic increase in filings in the past year.

Officials contend EOC a godsend

Questions raised about proposed college building at Destin Airport

By **TOM McLAUGHLIN**
Northwest Florida Daily News
315-4435 | tom@nwdailynews.com

DESTIN — Fire Chief Tuffy Dixon has had to evacuate his home base just twice in 19 years.

Both times, his men and his trucks were the last to leave as hurricanes approached. The experience was gut-wrenching, he said.

"That's just a sick, sick feeling to have to leave and take all of your resources out of Destin," he said.

In another year or so, there will be no more need to leave, Dixon said. Destin residents have received a "godsend" in the form of a \$6 million building to be constructed at Jay Odom's Destin Jet facility at Destin Airport.

The building, which will double as a Northwest Florida State College public safety education center, is being designed as a storm-proof storage facility for emergency equipment and an emergency operations center.

"It's something I've really wanted for a long time, but nothing in my wildest dreams I ever thought we'd get close to getting," Dixon said.

But the "special-purpose building" Dixon speaks so glowingly of is mired in controversy.

EOC or private hangar?

The building is a state-funded venture being built

PLEASE SEE EOC | A4

RECESSION from page A1

The owner of an Okaloosa County repossession business said it normally collects 100 cars a month. It is close to double that nowadays.

"We've had people coming in, just surrendering the car and saying, 'I might as well just give it to you now,'" said the owner, who said asked that his name not be used because his insurance company prohibits him from talking to media.

"Many of the repo cars are high-end, like BMW and Mercedes," he said.

Tracy Strom, whose Fort Walton Beach law practice specializes in bankruptcy, is finding herself more in demand.

According to records from the North Florida District Court of U.S. Bankruptcy Court, bankruptcies have risen sharply in the last two years. In 2006, there were 2,123 filings. In 2008, with numbers from only the first three quarters recorded, there were more than 3,000.

"My filings are up," Strom said. "More people have been calling. It's a sign of the times, but it's kind of heart-breaking when you're on this end of it."

She said she is seeing failed business owners and folks who have lost their jobs or who have had their hours cut.

"Some people have savings and they go through that for a year. And then they don't have a choice," she said. "They have to face reality."

Harper said high-end retail is the hardest-hit business sector right now, while discount retailers are seeing increased business.

Pawn shops are filing up with possessions that people are willing to turn over for cash.

"Probably the main reason more people are borrowing money this way is because banks are not loaning money," said Roy Majors, owner of Jimmy's Pawn Shop in Fort Walton Beach. "And some people are having a hard time paying it back."

He said one aspect of his business is doing particu-

larly well. Lots of folks have been buying guns since Barack Obama was elected president.

He added that safes have been big sellers, with people apparently preferring them to placing valuables in banks.

Paul Smith at the Trading Post pawn shop in Fort Walton Beach said that even though more folks are having trouble buying their possessions back, other people are snapping them up.

"We're seeing a large array of everything ... higher-end things coming from higher income levels," Smith said.

"And there are more people who can't buy them back, but if they don't pick it up, there's always someone out there who can afford it and who's looking for a bargain," he added.

Other types of businesses find that they are just as needed during bad times as good times.

A Santa Rosa Beach human resource consulting company has shifted its focus from headhunting and recruiting services to working with businesses trying to cut costs and employees.

"When companies are going through tough times, it's critical to have competent advice on human resource issues," said Lane Rees, who owns Human Resource Solutions.

And then there are the services that people need, regardless of the economy.

Liberty Tax Service, which has locations across the Emerald Coast, is expecting its tax preparers to be very busy this season.

"We're very optimistic," said Bob Jaros, who owns three locations in Bay County.

UWF's Harper confirmed that tax preparation services are among the businesses likely to do well, despite — or perhaps even because of — the recession.

"People need to file their taxes," Harper said. "There's no way to avoid it."

"They may be looking to professionals to squeeze every dollar out of their tax bill," he said.