



THE  
HEALTH  
*of* LEE  
COUNTY  
2010

Wow! If you've ever wanted a recipe for social volatility, you have a spicy one now. Start with a sour economy and let it simmer for a few months. Then, add a pinch of election-year rhetoric and, *bam!*, what you have is a flambé of Biblical proportions.

As understandable as it may be, frustration can make it very difficult to see things clearly. That's why we take time each fall to examine our community from several different perspectives.

If you believe what you've been hearing of late, you may be convinced that life has never been worse. But that simply isn't true.

Granted, the economy is lousy. Lee County's unemployment rate, the prime source of angst, was 11.1 percent in the latest report. It's true that sluggish economic growth has left our brick plants idle, and the much-publicized layoffs announced this fall at Pfizer didn't help either.

What seems to get lost is the other side of our balance sheet.

Take that local unemployment rate. Clearly, it's higher than anyone wants and there's still work to be done. But it is down from 14.6 percent in January. The numbers still aren't great, but they're moving in the right direction.

What about the overall economy? Well, the misery index, an economic gauge combining the national unemployment (9.6) and inflation (1.17) rates, to assess how bad off people are economically, is 10.77 percent. Again, not ideal, but less than half of the 21.98 posted in June 1980. Most people reading this will recall that time, when any money people *were* making was quickly consumed by a 14.38 percent inflation rate.

The layoffs have been depressing, too. But can anyone forget the governor's visit to Sanford in August to announce a major expansion at Caterpillar? And what about all of the other hiring at Static Control, Frontier Spinning and Parkdale America?

Let's make one thing perfectly clear: This is no cover up. (You wouldn't believe how many people accuse us each year of being *too candid!*)

We're *not* trying to diminish the challenges. But if we don't see things for what they truly are, we could make decisions that will make it even more difficult to recover and thrive once things really get rolling again.

"The Health of Lee County 2010" photo featuring Kenneth George of Cole's Pottery is courtesy of Chip Pate, Lee County Living magazine and The Sanford Herald.



# The Economy

▶ Light at the end of a very long tunnel?

**W**e've got *good* news and *bad* news. Which one do you want first?

OK, here's the bad news.

With apologies to former New York gubernatorial candidate Jimmy McMillan: Lee unemployment is too %@#\* high. For the record, our rate was 11.1 percent in October.

Now for the good news.

That's lower than the 14.6 percent posted in January. Lower than the 12.9 percent for the same month last year. And lower than all but one month since November '08.

In fact, unemployment has been slowly, but steadily, dropping all year long. A blip here. A blip there. But moving in the right direction.

Retail sales are looking better, too. Sales for this year topped last

year in six of the last eight months, ending with the most recent report for September. And in August and September, the difference was huge.

*How huge?* Try 33.8 percent huge, from \$71.7 million in August and September '09 to \$95.9 million in August and September '10.

We rarely look at the stock market in this annual report, but it does provide a reasonable overview of consumer spending, investment and wealth beyond our county borders.

So, here are two major indices: The Dow Jones Industrial Average is up 9.15 percent and the NASDAQ Composite is up 14.2 percent since trading ended last year.

We're not out of the dark yet, but we *can* see some light at the end of this very long tunnel.

# Labor

▶ Surprises, and many are actually good.

**O**ne Pantry-sized red flag went up last year, when the proportion of local manufacturing jobs unexpectedly dropped from roughly 38 percent of our workforce to just 34.

It was a jarring number because manufacturing pays an average of \$43,804 per year. That's well above the overall average of \$36,192. Also, far more than service (\$31,917), government (\$37,111) and retail trade (\$24,326) jobs, which round out Lee's top four employment sectors.

So, when this year's figure came in at 34 percent ... *again* ... it was another of those "good news-bad news" deals.

On the downside, it appears last year's drop was real. On the upside, the proportion didn't fall any lower

and — *surprise!* — the number of manufacturing jobs actually *increased* by 203. (Bet you didn't expect that.)

More good news: Lee County's average wage rose slightly, from \$35,984 to \$36,192. No giant leap, to be sure, and it didn't even keep up with inflation. But it wasn't the *decline* we saw last year, either.

And, now, for something else unexpected. Could the bad economy have actually helped us?

Education is critical for high-tech work, and we've heard anecdotes about people returning to school.

Stat of the Day: The proportion of Lee Countians with at least some college rose from 48.7 to 53.1 percent *since last year*. Higher percentages also hold associate degrees and bachelor degrees or higher.

excellent

good

fair

poor

## The Bottom Line

It's all about the trend. Yes, the economy is still in turmoil. And, yes, unemployment is too ... *uh* ... high. (Just as an aside: Remember when folks were saying the same thing about our 6 and 7 percent jobless rates?) We understand recovery will be slow, but it appears to be happening, and we'll take good news where we can get it.

excellent

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poor

## The Bottom Line

If manufacturing jobs were evaporating, as it seemed last year, our diagnosis would be less optimistic. But last year's result could have been due to The Great Recession, which hit manufacturing especially hard, and the education news is downright encouraging. So, all in all, the labor scene is better than expected.

# Education

► In a nutshell: improvement and change.

To be fair, not *everything* improved this time around.

Only seven of Lee's 15 public schools achieved "adequate yearly progress" in an annual report issued by the State Board of Education, down from 11 last year.

Otherwise, most typical measures of educational quality *did* improve — or, at least, held steady.

Among them: the number of schools making "expected" or "high" growth in the statewide ABCs report (13 of 14, no change), SAT scores (up 10 points to 1000, though that's still eight points shy of the state average) and the graduation rate (up 2.3 points to 73 percent).

Never forget our disclaimer: Deciphering educational statistics can be like reading tea leaves. But,

*hey*, you've heard that before.

Our educational landscape is currently in a state of change.

Lee County Schools expanded its laptop initiative, which installs Wi-Fi in schools and provides a computer to students in grade three and up.

Lee Early College honored its first seven graduates.

Project PK-14, being coordinated by top community leaders and the United Way, kicked off an effort to enhance education for all students.

And, Central Carolina Community College, ranked 49th nationally in Washington Monthly's 2010 College Guide, exceeded all eight state performance standards and received rave reviews for its Chinese cultural arts series offered through the Confucius Classroom.

# Quality of Life

► Thankfully, Nancy Grace is a distant memory.

Back when Nancy Grace was shoveling nightly coverage of Sanford to crime groupies around the globe, we wondered if a few high-profile incidents were omens of bad things to come.

Happily, no. Despite how it may have seemed, crime fell yet again this year — from 3,640 to 3,393 per 100,000 inhabitants. And the number has dropped every year since hitting a high of 7,201 in '02, declining even during a period of economic strife.

So, on to something new.

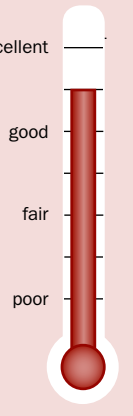
It makes sense at The Health of Lee County to look at ... *health*. It's not only important to our quality of life, but our economy, too, since health issues figure into the calculation companies and families make about where to locate.

Central Carolina Hospital has enhanced its facility and improved in several measures of patient care. Perhaps as a result, the hospital has seen a surge in outpatient surgeries and the use of other services over the last year and has received recognition from outside groups.

Also, Sanford was named a "Playful City USA" community for the second straight year by KaBOOM! for providing more opportunities for children to be active and healthy.

On the other hand, a struggling economy forced Temple Theatre to trim its Mainstage schedule, though the theater has survived, and leaner budgets have put a damper on charitable donations, local services and community projects.

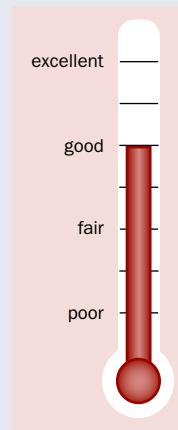
excellent



## The Bottom Line

It's tempting to get giddy with educational tea leaves pointing toward a better future. That would be a mistake. There's work ahead to get some numbers on par with state and national averages and, more importantly, to compete overall with other districts in the Research Triangle Region. Education, after all, is *the* key to success in a high-tech, international economy.

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## The Bottom Line

Crime, which used to be a hot-button issue, has all but disappeared as a top local concern and there has been some good news in health care. But dropping charitable donations are limiting community services. Before leaving the "quality of life," though, congratulations to The Sanford Pottery Festival, which will hold its 10th anniversary show on April 30 and May 1, 2011!