

# Business Is Priority One

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Economic development and support of small businesses rank high for Newton's leaders in 2009.

The city is excited that the new Target Distribution Center off N.C. 10 is near complete and soon to make an impact on Catawba County's high 9.7 percent unemployment rate.

"It's over 500 new jobs. Certainly that will be a positive impact on the latest unemployment figures," said Newton City Manager Todd Clark.

He said he'd like to know that all those positions will be filled by Catawba County residents, though it's likely they will compete with Lincoln County residents for those jobs.

They likely won't be the last new jobs to come to the area, either. Clark said the city continues to hear from companies outside the area that have an interest in Newton. He thinks the city has also made it through site selection cuts for some companies. However, he would not be more specific since he said companies prefer they not disclose which areas they are considering so early in the process.

"We do feel like there are positive things happening," he said.

As the city continues to recruit more economic development to the area, Clark said they are looking for quality companies. He said Newton wants businesses that produce a large number of jobs and above-average salaries; that the jobs require a minimum of a high school diploma or its equivalent; that the company is willing to make a substantial investment through its facility plans; and that the company has a strong history of performance.

Clark said another emphasis will be placed on providing more support for local small businesses, both in downtown and elsewhere within Newton.

"Small business is the backbone of our economy," Clark said.

He said they want to develop an atmosphere that is conducive to small business. To help with that, the city recently hired Rob Powell, who will serve as a liaison between the city and small business owners. Clark said a call to Powell should also be the first call made by anyone wishing to start a small business in Newton.

"We may not have all the answers for them, but we want to be that resource," he said.

Clark said Powell will help them identify potential sites for their business and go over city requirements, including zoning and occupancy certification.

"I think it's extremely important for someone to know right from the beginning what they are going to encounter," he said.

While Clark said the city can never guarantee success for a new business owner, they want to create an atmosphere that helps them be successful.

If small businesses do well, he said those businesses help support larger industries in the area through the products and services they provide, from the grocery stores, to restaurants where they dine clients, to office supply stores and clothing shops.

"We recognize that small business is just as important as large industry," Clark said.

Another important project for Newton is the Heritage Trail, part of a city greenway system. Clark said the city has already cleared the next three-quarter-mile leg of the trail that will double its length.

Clark said the city is moving forward with grading the next section of trail. He said a number of people are already taking advantage of the first phase of the project that was completed in August. The trail is presently about three-quarters of a mile in length, stretching from West Seventh Street across West First Street to Radio Station Road.

The next phase will run from Radio Station Road, back behind the Catawba County Justice Center and out to N.C. 10.

Public demand and grant funding have made the Heritage Trail a priority for the city. Clark said those type of amenities promote fitness and are enticing for local residents and businesses.

In 2005, Newton received a \$100,000 North Carolina Department of Transportation Enhancement Grant to complete the second phase, and the Newton City Council chipped in another \$25,000. The first phase cost \$75,000 to complete.

The coming year is expected to come with challenges that test the city to some degree, especially with the economic recession.

"I certainly think with the economy in the state it is, it is going to present a challenge for the city," Clark said. "In the short term, I see it as a challenge, yes, but we need to be prepared to restart the economic engine."

He said it provides the city a chance to strengthen its footholds and position the city for the opportunities that are likely to come within the next 12 to 18 months.

One hope is that President-elect Barack Obama's proposal to put people back to work by pouring money into infrastructure projects is approved. If it is, Newton and other municipalities across the nation may be eligible to receive funds for infrastructure projects that are ready to go as soon as funding is available.

Such a move would allow the city to tackle a number of important projects that are high on the city's priority list, including the Burris Road pump station and replacing 1,200 linear feet of aging sewer line. Those funds could also help expedite some water and sewer upgrades in the McDaniels Drive mobile home park. Clark said the city is hoping it can avoid borrowing money, but either using money made available by the new presidential administration or through the use of the city's own public works staff.

The city also has plans to double its electric capacity by constructing a new electric substation off N.C. 10 on the opposite side of Long Drive. Clark said it's a matter of planning for the future and grants Newton the ability to take on additional customers. The city hopes to have that project completed by August.

Improvements to the wastewater treatment facility are also due to be complete by June 30 or soon after.

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