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Eugene retailers hope for the best

■ Small business owners believe Oregon's recession will not negatively affect sales

By Brook Reinhard
 Oregon Daily Emerald

Local businesses are hoping for a hopping holiday season, in spite of economic indicators that point to the contrary.

The unemployment rate has been steadily increasing in Oregon since September, and nationally, unemployment increased half a percentage point to bring the jobless rate to 5.4 percent.

The Oregon economy is one of the worst in the country right now, according to the Eugene Area Chamber of Commerce, but local businesses are confident the next several months will strengthen sagging sales. Some companies even say this season may be the best they've had in years.

"We kick ass over Christmas," said Raenie Kane, a manager for House of Records on East 13th Avenue. "We're ordering a bit more (inventory) than we used to."

Terry Connolly, director of government affairs for the Chamber of Commerce, said that retail businesses often depend on the winter months for much of their sales.

"The holiday season may bring an upswing in business," Connolly said.

Mark Agerter, co-owner of Eugene Toy and Hobby, said the shop is actually doing better in the economic downturn.

"It's been nuts down here," he said. "My heart goes out to the businesses that aren't doing well."

Agerter attributes Toy and Hobby's success to a shift in consumer mentality that occurs during a recession. For example, remote control cars and model trains, planes and cars are top sellers this year, and Agerter said these items do well because customers have been doing more activities at home and spending less money overall.

"People aren't buying a \$50,000 car. They're spending \$500 on a toy car," he said.

Jane Scheidecker, director of the

Oregon Small Business Development program run through Lane Community College, agreed with Agerter. Since Sept. 11, "people are talking about personal and family health issues like having adequate food, housing, transportation and positive human relations," she said. "We're kind of the last ones to get the message."

Weldon Spangler, regional director of operations for Starbucks in Oregon and Southern Washington, said that customers at Starbucks have also been focused on basic needs. While customers have been actively participating in a toy drive the coffee chain has sponsored, it's too early to tell whether participation has been affected as a result of Sept. 11 or the downturn in the economy, he said.

Arlyn Schaufler, merchandise division manager for the University Bookstore, said there is an increasing focus on community values for this holiday season, and that customers have noticed the difference.

"People are nicer to each other and pay more attention to each other," Schaufler said.

The bookstore's business has actually picked up this year because of higher student enrollment and the success of the University's football team, Schaufler said. However, since students often leave town over the holidays, the company doesn't expect the holiday season to add much to the bottom line — only 9 percent of bookstore's sales are rung up between Thanksgiving and the New Year.

The Book Mark, another local bookstore, doesn't depend on the holidays, either.

"December is a normal month," owner Larry West said. The store used to get one-third of their business over the holidays, but sales for the business have gradually evened out over the years.

Terry White, manager of Eugene True Value Hardware, agreed with West.

"We've made no change," he said. "December is our largest month of the year — but it's just another month."

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