

Retailers hope confidence boosts holiday sales

BY MARTIN CRUISINGER
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Personal spending edged up modestly in October, but retailers are hoping that higher consumer confidence and lower energy prices will yield bigger gains during the holiday shopping season. The Commerce Department reported that personal spending rose by 0.2 percent in October, a slowdown from a 0.5 percent increase in September but better than the 0.5 percent decrease recorded in August.

Spending for the past three months has slowed considerably after sizable gains in June and July as consumers rushed to take advantage of attractive discounts that automakers were offering to boost car sales. Incomes were up 0.4 percent in October after two months in which that indicator of business health had been skewed by the impact of the property destruction caused by hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Economists believe an improving jobs picture will bolster incomes further in the

months ahead and put consumers in a shopping mood for the holiday season. In another report, the Labor Department said the number of hurricane-related job losses totaled just 9,600 last week, down significantly from the 21,000 storm-related jobless claims filed the previous week. The new storm claims pushed the total number of Americans who have lost their jobs because of Katrina, Rita and Wilma to 592,000. The 9,600 storm claims came out

of an overall total of 320,000 new claims for unemployment benefits filed last week, a figure that was down by 17,000 from the previous week. This indicates continued improvements in the labor market. Economists closely watch the performance of consumer spending because it accounts for two-thirds of the total economy. The small 0.2 percent gain for October got the fourth quarter off to a modest start following growth at a sizzling rate of 4.3 percent in the July-September quarter,

according to a revised estimate of the gross domestic product released on Wednesday. Many economists believe the GDP growth rate will slow in the October-December period to between 3 percent and 4 percent, which would still be a solid performance, especially in light of the blows the economy has taken this year from the destruction from the Gulf Coast hurricanes and a surge in energy prices. An inflation gauge tied to the con-

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Bush tree lighting focuses on troops

BY JENNIFER LOVEN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — For the fifth year in a row, President Bush on Thursday dedicated the lighting of the national Christmas tree to U.S. troops risking their lives far from home and loved ones. "We ask for God to watch over our men and women in uniform who are serving overseas. Their families miss them, hold a seat open for them and pray for their safe return," Bush said. "Many of them are serving in distant lands tonight, but they are close to our hearts." A moment later, the president and his wife, Laura, were aided by three local girls as they flicked the switch that illuminated the dazzling white lights and snowflakes that adorn the live, 40-foot Colorado blue spruce that stands permanently on the Ellipse just south of the White House. Jackie, Melissa and Jenna Kantor of nearby Bethesda, Md., were chosen to assist the president because they started a program called Project Backpack that assembles bags stuffed with school supplies for Gulf Coast children affected by Hurricane Katrina. "We have a responsibility to help those in need," the president said af-

ter an hourlong outdoor variety show of Christmas songs and readings. "Acts of kindness toward others fulfill the spirit of the season." Though the "Pageant of Peace" attended by thousands was festive, Bush noted soberly that "we approach Christmas in this time of war." Bush has never presided over a tree-lighting ceremony that has not included mentions of troops serving overseas in difficult missions, as his first Christmas as president came not long after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and Afghanistan campaign that followed, and the Iraq war began in 2003. The tree will remain lighted and open for public viewing through December, and musical performances by volunteer choirs and dancers are scheduled nightly through Dec. 23. The Bushes went from the Ellipse to the White House to kick off their holiday entertaining season. The first couple welcomed about 500 friends and supporters to a holiday reception on the lavishly decorated State Floor of the White House, press secretary Scott McClellan said. Thursday's party guests were the first of 9,500 expected to attend almost nightly White House receptions through the holidays.

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White House decor more 'natural' in 2005

BY ELISABETH GOODRIDGE
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — The White House is experimenting with a non-traditional Christmas tree decoration this year — laboratory test tubes. As part of the "All Things Bright and Beautiful" theme selected for the 2005 holiday season, first lady Laura Bush came up with the idea of decorating Christmas trees with fresh flowers. That left White House Chief Florist Nancy Clarke with the problem of keeping all those roses, lilies and azaleas properly hydrated. "One of my suggestions was that we take a test tube, a regular test tube from any kind of lab and wrap it with wire," Clarke said. "We could fill it up with water and actually make a Christmas ornament and still give our flowers a water source." It worked, and on Wednesday, when Bush presented 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue's holiday decorations, flower-bedecked Christmas trees stood in the State Floor rooms. The centerpiece, Bush said, is the official White House Christmas tree, a 18 1/2-foot Fraser fir adorned with white lilies, crystal ornaments and white Christmas lights. The tree is so tall the Blue Room's chandelier had to be removed.

"I think it is one of the most beautiful Christmas trees I've ever seen," Bush said. Wearing a Carolina Herrera two-piece suit — what she called "her new red suit" — she also presented simple one-color bouquets of tulips that grazed mantels, and boxwood garlands with gold trim that adorned mirrors. Wreaths with gold-trimmed lime sashes hung in windows and fresh tangerines or pears played prominent roles in table centerpieces. Bush said they deliberately took a simpler approach to the decorations, holiday cuisine and the official Christmas card to highlight the elegance of the official residence. "We used natural and real flowers, fruits and garlands to show how beautiful nature is," she said. The natural theme could be seen in the holiday food choices as well. Samples of the cuisine to be served at upcoming parties included cheese from Vermont and Minnesota, Virginia ham and traditional fruit cake and apple cobbler. Straying from the simplicity, however, was an enormous and elaborate gingerbread White House, made by White House pastry chef Thaddeus DeBois.

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