

Spending: Gas prices go down in time for the holidays

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sumer spending report showed prices, excluding food and energy, rose by just 1.8 percent in the 12 months ending in October, the slowest pace since a 1.6 percent year-over-year rise in February 2004.

This inflation gauge, which is closely followed by officials at the Federal Reserve, should provide assurances that inflation pressures are not getting out of hand.

Consumer spending had posted huge gains of 1 percent in June and 1.4 percent in July as buyers flocked to auto showrooms to take advantage of "employee discount" deals offers by automakers. But spending since that time has been buffeted by a drop-off in auto sales, causing a 0.5 percent drop in spending in August.

Economists are hoping that a retreat in gasoline prices from the record highs set in early September will help lift consumer spirits about purchases for Christmas.

The outlook for the holiday shopping season got a boost earlier this

week when the Conference Board reported that consumer confidence rebounded sharply in November, giving hope that Americans will be enthusiastic shoppers despite a mixed start to the shopping season last weekend.

The Conference Board said its Consumer Confidence Index rose to 98.9 this month, well above the 85.2 recorded in October and the highest reading since August.

The income and spending report said that the 0.4 percent rise in incomes in October followed a huge 1.7 percent surge in September and a 1 percent plunge in August. But the August and September figures were heavily influenced by insurance payments from the hurricanes.

Americans' personal savings, a percent of after-tax income, remained in negative territory in October at minus 0.7 percent, the fifth straight month that the savings rate has been in negative territory. This means that people have had to borrow or dip into savings to support their spending.

Decor: Glitter mesh lights up the holiday season, naturally

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paint to metal. Pieces are then placed in a large stand-up oven, which melts the powder and bonds paint to the metal to inhibit rusting.

While the metalwork is under way, other employees are busy cutting PVC film in a variety of colors and thicknesses into thin strips that will be spun into 24-foot-long sections of garland. By hand, seamstresses create bows from 12 inches to 7 feet tall.

The most labor-intensive part of the entire process is wrapping strips of lights onto the metal frames, Milstein said.

"It takes a lot of time and has to be done just right," Milstein said.

Many communities are ordering decorations with glitter mesh — wire mesh encrusted with large, bright flecks of glitter. Other pieces incorporate "eye-catcher disks" — small circles of metal that move with the wind and reflect light.

"This is one way to save energy, since no electricity is needed to catch the sunlight," Milstein said. "And they are colorful even during the daytime."

Once a project is completed, it is broken down, boxed and shipped by tractor-trailer, UPS or airplane.

Milstein said production costs rose this year — fabric, shipping containers and transportation — but the company saved on steel and workers compensation by moving to Oregon.

Pay rates start at minimum wage and go up from there, Milstein said, depending on skill levels. The company is seeking good welders and has worked with both Linn-Benton Community College and a private local welding school to find qualified workers.

"We also work with area nurseries to share seasonal employees," Milstein said.

The company has already filled the Excor Road site's 66,000 square feet of production space, Milstein said, and virtually every parking space fills up during the busy season.

"We actually got rid of quite a bit of equipment when the company moved here," Milstein said. "The wide-open space of this building increased our overall efficiency, and the equipment wasn't needed."

Many of the machines used to cut and twirl garland are World War II vintage, Milstein said. "They're solid as a rock," he said.

To smooth out the highs and lows of production year-round, the company has expanded its line to include products for disguising cellular telephone towers to look like trees.

"We provide all of the branch parts. Let's say someone wants a 50-foot blue spruce, we can do it," Milstein said. "This is a year-round product, and the market is growing. It's really amazing how good they look."



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