

# Memphis Business Journal

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## Memphis-area chambers tout successful year thanks to proactive growth strategies

Memphis Business Journal - by [Lauren Oxner](#)

Economic development sounds like an initiative that would be suffering in the current economy. But that's not the story you'll hear from the economic development officials at several area chambers of commerce.

Citing factors like membership increases, new job creation and significant capital investment figures, these officials say that rather than wait for times to get better, they've been promoting programs to advance the Memphis business community. And they are seeing positive results.

So what have economic development officials been doing recently to make sure activity levels don't take too big of a hit? Mark Herbison, senior vice president of economic development for the **Greater Memphis Chamber**, says that a big part of his job is being proactive, something he achieves by traveling the nation and promoting Memphis to outside businesses.

The work has paid off, as Herbison says that **in 2009 the chamber has facilitated 30 projects that should create nearly 4,000 jobs.**

**"It's not a slow time for us; in fact, it's the busiest we've seen it since 2006,"** he says. "We're meeting all our goals for job creation and capital projects."

In terms of industry, **the biggest growth recently has come from logistics, manufacturing and the biosciences.** Herbison gives examples of **companies that have contributed to this growth by expanding and hiring in the area, including Medtronic, Inc., American Esoteric Laboratories, Inc., and Nike, Inc.**

Along with his team's commitment to being proactive, Herbison says that recent changes in the local PILOT, or payment in lieu of taxes program, have affected business growth.

Several years ago, the local government implemented a hefty number of policies that drastically limited a business' ability to prosper, and it was reflected in the chamber's drop in activity and membership.

Those policies were lifted in April; as Herbison puts it, "it's now less bureaucratic and easier to work with."

If there is one thing standing in the way of economic development officials' growth goal, it's not the economy, Herbison says, but the mindset of the city itself.

"Honestly, our biggest problem here is our attitude about our city," he says. "People outside of Memphis actually have a positive perception of us. This is one of the great cities in the country, and we must stop being so negative."

Another official who echoes Herbison's positive sentiment is economic development director at the **Bartlett Area Chamber**, Clay Banks, who says that the **growth figures coming out of Bartlett in the past two years are extremely encouraging.** In 2008, the city of about **50,000 residents welcomed 800 new jobs and nearly \$14 million in capital investments, and no companies implemented significant layoffs.** Banks projects that **2009 will also prove lucrative: To date, there are 1,200 new jobs, and capital investments figures are holding pace with last year's level.**

The explanation for this growth, Banks says, comes from the fact that Bartlett contains a very diverse business community.

"Bartlett is a very resilient community," he says. "We aren't overly reliant on one industry."

Banks and his team at the chamber recently closed the door on the first phase of a pro-growth plan for the city. Chamber director John Threlkeld, who came from the Greater Memphis Chamber three years ago, realized that Bartlett had lots of vacant property that needed to be marketed.

During phase one of this project, Threlkeld collaborated with the city of Bartlett and gained the support of 10 strategic partners to invest in an economic development wing of the chamber. The next phase is a 10-year plan to recruit four types of industries: life science, agribusiness, retail and a catch-all category. The plan still has to appear before and be approved by a committee.

Nearby areas of Mississippi are also expecting some positive numbers as particular industries become more attracted to the area, says Vickie DuPree, executive director at the **Olive Branch Chamber of Commerce.** Dupree says that the **Mississippi State Department of Health** recently changed the certificate of need policies in counties that are growing at high rates. After years of chasing a DeSoto County hospital, **Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare, Inc.,** was awarded a CON and plans to build a 100-bed, \$151 million hospital in Olive Branch in the next few years.

Dupree says the arrival of this hospital will impact economic development by attracting more health care-related industries and support services to the area.

“We feel that health care-related industries will attract a population with higher income brackets that will also benefit the commercial retail developments in the area.”

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