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## Top 10: Economic slowdown has government weighing priorities

By: MICHELLE WILLARD, Post Staff Writer

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As most of the public has made, and likely broken, a few resolutions in this New Year, all levels of local government have also gotten their priorities straight for 2009.

The top 10 (11, because we try harder) government agencies in charge of Murfreesboro and Rutherford County's quality of life shared their priorities for the coming year.

Not surprisingly, many are worried about depleting cash reserves and have set the priorities to be good stewards of the taxpayers' money because of the recession, while still providing for the community.

When the General Assembly convenes in January, both houses of the legislature will have a lot on their respective plates.

In the state **House of Representatives**, balancing Tennessee's budget will be priority No. 1, Rep. Kent Coleman (D-Murfreesboro) said.

"The main issue we're going to have to work on this year is reducing expenditures and that will be an effort on the legislature's part because of the extreme slowdown in the economy," Coleman said.

"I think we're out of balance approximately \$1 billion," he said, adding many people will be hurt by the cuts that have to be made.

Coleman said the state should to find a way to better fund higher education and increase access to lottery scholarships, as well as find a way to control the cost of prescription drugs.

"I hope the Tennessee legislature will look at this problem and come up with some solutions, which will make drugs available and more affordable to its citizens," he said.

Sen. Bill Ketron (R-Murfreesboro) said the state **Senate** will take a shot of its own at the health care industry with medical malpractice tort reform.

"Tennessee was identified as a high prior state by the American Medical Association of the need to enact medical malpractice tort reform," Ketron said, adding states like Texas and Mississippi had more than 12,000 new doctors open up shop after they enacted limits on damages in medical malpractice lawsuits.

"Hopefully we can pass some reform ... and come off that high priority list," he said.

Ketron said he state budget will also be a main concern in Nashville, because of the budget shortfall.

"I think the financial crisis we'll be staring at will have an effect on every piece of legislation we try to pass," he said.

**Rutherford County** will also take a close look at the bottom line when the fiscal year 2009-2010 budget process starts in later this month.

"Our top priority is to try to find a way to find the revenue we need to support the programs we're responsible for," County Mayor Ernest Burgess said.

Burgess said building permits, county taxes and fee receipts are down from last year and down

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substantially compared to the last five years.

"It seems to be shrinking even though we're above our budgeted projections," he said.

Although sales tax revenues are up 4 percent from last year, that only makes up a small percentage of the county's budget. More importantly, fees are down between 12 percent and 15 percent, Rutherford County Deputy Finance Director Elaine Short said.

"We need to be as efficient as we can and not spend any more money than we have," she said.

**Murfreesboro** government and city council will also try to be as efficient as possible, while still providing for its citizens in 2009.

"Our No. 1 priority this year for the (Murfreesboro City) council is to continue to deliver the services that our residents and business owners expect that are set in the current budget of Murfreesboro," Murfreesboro Mayor Tommy Bragg said.

Bragg said the city has worked over the past five years to encourage business and economic growth that has translated into higher sales and property tax revenue.

"Hopefully, we will continue to deliver the level of services our citizens expect," he said.

The city's past and present economic development was helped greatly by the **Rutherford County Chamber of Commerce**, which isn't a government agency, but has done much for the community.

Economic growth is something Chamber President Mike Malone will set as his main priority by encouraging business growth and expanding membership services in 2009.

Malone said the current economic climate stresses the need to expand the relationships between local businesses and the county.

"It emphasizes how important our plan is for the future of Rutherford County," Malone said.

#### **Planning in 2009**

The Chamber of Commerce isn't the only one to plan for the future in 2009. Both the **Rutherford County Regional Planning** and **Murfreesboro City Planning and Engineering departments** have their eyes set on updating regulations in the new year.

Rutherford County Regional Planning Department's No. 1 priority is to create a comprehensive plan for the entire county.

"We're really excited about getting that started," said Elizabeth Emslie, assistant planning director. "Hopefully we'll be a pretty good way into the plan by the end of the year."

It will take up to 12-18 months to develop the plan, which is the foundation document for the county's development goals and objectives for the next 20 years, Planning Director Doug Demosi said previously.

From the comprehensive plan, planners will then rewrite the county's zoning resolution, which hasn't been overhauled since the mid-1980s. Emslie said rewriting the resolution will be the top priority of 2010.

Murfreesboro's Planning and Engineering Department also plans to update and modernize parts of the city's subdivision regulations in 2009, Murfreesboro Planning Director Joseph Aydelott said.

First, Aydelott wants to digitize the regulations.

"We want to modernize that so we can put it on the Internet or e-mail it to people," he said.

The regulations will also see some minor changes to bring them in line with today's technology in the construction industry, Aydelott said.

For example, the regulations, which were written in 1974, have no provision for using a laser line level in the construction of homes.

"We want to formalize the new technologies that have become commonplace," Aydelott said. "Some have been out there for some time, and we just want to be better able to help people with these things."

#### **Public Safety in 2009**

**Both the Murfreesboro Police Department** and **Rutherford County Sheriff's Office** have set crime fighting as their top priorities in 2009.

"We plan to continue to keep the community safe and ensure the quality of life," County Sheriff

Truman Jones said.

The two departments plan to accomplish their joint goal by partnering in a training facility.

Bidding for construction will begin in January, and Jones expects the firing range to be complete by the summer.

"We also look forward to bringing a new city/county firing range on line in 2009 to improve the quality and quantity of firearms training for our police officers and sheriff's deputies," said Kyle Evans, MPD public information officer.

Both departments will be watching their budgets closely and coming up with new ways to improve public safety at little cost.

"We're aware this will be a real tough year all around," Jones said. "But we are hoping for a major turn around that will take the burden off those people who are affected most."

MPD will employ a new cost-effective computer software system to aid police dispatch, records management and give mobile data access to police cruisers.

"These changes will allow for better management and sharing of information at both the local and state level," Evans said.

### **Education in 2009**

Maintaining academic excellence while balancing budget concerns are the top priorities at both **Murfreesboro City** and **Rutherford County school systems**.

"We're focused on kids," MCS Director Marilyn Mathis said.

She pledges to build on the academic success of last year, when a whopping 93 percent of fifth-grade students scored in the competent to outstanding range, earning the system an A in writing from the state.

Mathis would also like to improve test scores for Hispanic and students with limited English to remove the system's high priority status from No Child Left Behind Adequate Yearly Progress report.

Rutherford County schools scored near perfect on the state report card on schools, outpacing all but eight school districts in the state in 2008.

"We did really well on the report card and we'd like to repeat that again in '09," RCS spokesman James Evans said.

RCS will also be focused on opening Brown's Chapel Elementary School in August and move forward on other capital projects, like the proposed middle schools in Buchanan and near Oakland High School.

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