

Recession hasn't upset Upstate dining habits

Tax revenues show restaurants did better in late '08 than in early '08

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Restaurant tax collections that help finance parks, recreation and tourism are rising or holding their own in this area despite the recession, meaning restaurants are bringing in more dollars.

In particular, the city of Greer and Greenville County are bucking statewide trends.

The restaurant business statewide is down, some as much as 40 percent, most down 5 to 10 percent, depending on the area, according to Tom Sponseller, president and CEO of the Hospitality Association of South Carolina.

But the city of Greer's 2-percent restaurant tax collections rose 8 percent; Greenville County's rose 5.9 percent, and the city of Greenville's fell off less than 1 percent the last six months of 2008 compared with the last six months of 2007, according to officials.

At the same time, unemployment rose, standing in December at 7.6 percent in Greenville County and 9.4 percent in Spartanburg County, according to the state Employment Security Commission. Greer straddles the county line.

"Anything value oriented is going to be very popular," said Dr. Charles Partlow, chairman of the University of South Carolina's School of Hotel Restaurant and

Tourism Management.

Sponseller said, "The higher you go price-wise the more impacted the restaurant is."

Several restaurants in Greer have closed, but new ones have opened.

"Our numbers are up," said Mutts BBQ owner Randy Jones.

"People are looking for even more of a value than they used to," Jones said. "We're having to be a lot more aggressive with our offers, with our pricing. It is a marketplace where you can do well, but you're going to have to stay aggressive."

John Kimbrell, president and CEO of the Greater Greer Chamber of Commerce, said he feels that Greer's population growth and new restaurants have driven the hospitality tax revenues up.

McDonald's, which recently opened a second store in Greer on Wade Hampton Boulevard, has changed its pricing strategies to get more people into its restaurants, and its gourmet coffees have been successful, according to Partlow. The chain's stock has shown a strong increase recently, he said.

It has added lower priced snack items to try to build sales during slack times.

"You can go in with two bucks in your pocket, and you can walk out and still feel like you're getting a pretty decent lunch. You're getting something to eat," Partlow said.