

Local Officials Comment On State Of Garrett Co. Economy

by Glenn Tolbert

The state of the economy in Garrett County is a frequent topic of conversation among business leaders, employees, and just local residents in general. Several key persons in the community were recently asked for their take on the local economy, with a number of interesting, and some rather surprising, responses received.



DUANE YODER

Starting with Duane Yoder, president and CEO of Garrett County Community Action (GCCAC), a little known fact is that his agency assists in some form or another, 7,000 households in the county, or approximately 40 percent of the entire county population.

That essentially means that nearly half of the local population does not earn enough money to live without some form of subsidy or assistance.

According to Yoder, hour-

ly wage earners, even those making as much as \$15 per hour, require some form of assistance, with everything from child care to food subsidies.

"Ninety-five percent of the people who come to us are employed," he said. "But they find it necessary to seek various types of assistance to keep their family together."

Yet another concern for Yoder's organization is the population trend in the county.

"Young people are leaving, and that leaves us with an ag-



MONTY PAGENHARDT

ing population," he says.

Monty Pagenhardt has been the county administrator for the past 20 years, and plans to retire this summer. His assessment of the current local economy is generally that "everybody is hurting."

Like others interviewed for this article, Pagenhart makes note of the fact that rural areas like Garrett County

are often the last to go into a recession, and typically among the last to pull out of an economic dive.

He also points out that when real estate values go down, the damage "filters up" to everyone else.

Charged with overseeing some 340 county employees, he says that in general he has "felt blessed" with the high caliber of employees, which he considers another strong asset. He added that it is unusual for someone to hold his position for so many years.

"Charles County has had two or three county administrators in the past few years," he said. "So it is clear that I think well enough of our county employees to have



CARISSA RODEHEAVER

stuck around for as long as I have."

Carissa Rodeheaver is the recently named president and incoming chief financial officer of First United Bank and Trust, the third largest bank in the state, with assets of over \$3.1 billion. One of her primary concerns is the large inventory of local real estate lots that aren't moving nearly as fast as they once did.

"Yet, overall, I see the county's economy as stable,"



MICHAEL KOCH

she said, "and I feel very certain of a turnaround."

Michael Koch, who recently held the position of the county's economic director for two years, says that in part Garrett County needs to work on improving its tax base.

"We need to encourage more investments," he said. "Investors want to see that their money will grow if they invest in an area. Also, in the past, Garrett County has never been in a position where we could say 'no' to a facility coming in here. We need to be able to pick and choose more to ensure that a new business fits into our overall plan."

While there was not total agreement among those interviewed, there seems to be a general feeling that, despite the current downturn, there is reason to think that the future holds considerable promise for the region.