

City EDC celebrates 2008

By Jason deBruyn
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MARVIN City economic development officials celebrated a good year, but offered cautious predictions for the next year.

"I think you will be amazed at everything that was accomplished this year," Monroe Economic Director Chris Plat#xe9; told the Monroe Economic Development Commission Thursday at the year-end meeting held at Longview Country Club.

Indeed, local businesses committed to \$105 million in capital improvements in 2008; only 2007 and 2003 had more. The average since 1996 is about \$65 million.

Looking forward, however, members of the commission said that the upcoming 24 months would likely be difficult and hard work would be needed not only to ensure the stability of existing industries but also to establish a base that will be attractive to companies when they consider expansion.

"(Existing industries) are just as important, if not more important, as the new projects in most cases," said Monroe Councilman Bob Smith, who serves on the commission. He said the council is committed to creating green environmentally friendly jobs, especially in solar energy. There are also opportunities for metal-producing industries, of which Monroe has several, that could increase business by producing components for windmills or solar panels, he said.

"We're trying to be on the cutting edge," said Smith, who is involved with regional public power agencies.

See CITY / Page 2A

City

Continued from Page 1A

Leaders warned that there will be fewer capital investments in 2009 and the slowdown could last into 2010. Plat#xe9; said that instead of focusing on new or expanding businesses, the economic development office would have to shift its focus to looking after the well-being of existing industry.

Plat#xe9; said secure local companies can become good marketing tools when the U.S. economy climbs out of its recession. Companies looking to expand often talk to existing industries to gauge how they will be treated if they locate in a particular community, he said.

Monroe Existing Industry Coordinator Ron Mahle will play a key role in that effort.

Recently awarded the Key Public Power Account Executive designation, one of only seven nationwide to receive that designation in 2008, Mahle told the commission that "it's all about relationships," and promised to build on what he did this year, which included 35 company visits and seminars that attracted 64 companies to participate.

Besides taking care of industries, a slowed growth year will give infrastructure a time to catch up, Smith said, adding that the council will work to expand water, sewer, natural gas and roadways.

"We know we can't attract good industry without good utilities," he said. "Just look at Union County. It's tough to get around."

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