

Richmond Forecast 2010

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As the nation and the world sort out what the economy is going to look like post-recession, every county also has to determine what their role will be in the economic future. While the most recent recession brought many issues to the forefront, has it really changed the realities of counties like Wayne County? Loss of traditional manufacturing jobs and population decline were issues prior to the recession for Wayne and surrounding counties. The overall strategy to surviving the recession isn't much different than the overall strategy of surviving in an increasingly competitive, technological, and global economy.

In spite of the issues surrounding unemployment and the perceived lack of workforce skills, manufacturers are still finding benefits—the workforce being one of them—for expanding in Wayne County. Jason Finishing Group, an international industrial abrasives maker, recently relocated a manufacturing line from North Carolina to their Richmond plant, creating nearly fifty new jobs by 2012 and making a \$550,000 investment. According to company officials, engaged employees and a strong management team were among the reasons for expanding in Wayne County.

In spite of the economic downturn, an entrepreneurial approach has led to survival strategies for two Wayne County companies. CIT, a materials handling and product machining manufacturer producing automotive component parts, was awarded a three-year contract to produce physical therapy tables for the health care equipment industry. Company officials stated that due to the ups and downs of the automotive industry they constantly worked on diversifying their products and customer base. When the casket manufacturing industry took a

■ **TABLE 1: Unemployment, Household Income and Population in Wayne and Surrounding Counties**

County	September 2009 Unemployment Rate	2007 Median Household Income	2008 Population	Population Growth since 1990
Wayne	10.9	\$39,239	67,795	-5.8
Henry	12.0	42,306	47,162	-2.0
Randolph	10.2	40,071	25,801	-5.0
Fayette	13.4	39,948	24,265	-6.7
Union	8.6	41,103	7,157	2.9
Darke, OH	9.9	46,556	52,027	-3.0
Preble, OH	11.1	48,323	41,643	3.8

Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau, and Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services

downturn, casket manufacturer, J. M. Hutton, took an entrepreneurial approach in deciding to use the skills of their existing workforce to produce truck body and airplane parts. The over \$1 million investment in new equipment retained nearly 100 jobs and created some new jobs for one of Wayne County's oldest companies.

Wayne County, just like the other counties in our region, has had employment setbacks. According to the recently released report, *Richmond Indicators: A Community and Economic Benchmark Report*, the county lost 1,500 jobs between 2001 and 2007, a 4 percent decline. Of the three largest sectors (manufacturing, retail trade, and health care and social assistance), two saw a decrease in employment since 2001, with manufacturing down 1,250 jobs and retail trade down 653 jobs. However, health care and social assistance posted job gains.

The report also shows there were 29,700 Wayne County jobs as of June 2009, compared to 32,700 jobs a year earlier. It comes as no surprise that the county's September 2009 unemployment rate jumped to 10.9 percent, putting the county twenty-sixth in the state in unemployment.

Several neighboring counties are facing similar challenges in unemployment, population decline

and low median household income with some of their numbers worse than Wayne County's. Surrounding counties in both Indiana and Ohio struggle to varying degrees to hold their own in the rapidly changing economic environment (see **Table 1**).

To strengthen our economy in the short term as well as for the future, we need to recognize that Richmond and Wayne County serve as a hub of a larger six- to seven-county area that includes western Ohio. We must all work together to address the needs of our existing business base and sell the positive assets of the region. In an increasingly competitive and global economy, no single county operates as an island. Our problems do not recognize municipal or state boundaries, but fortunately neither do our strengths.

Economic development organizations cannot be responsible for solving all the problems we face. But by working with entrepreneurial-minded companies who are aware of what our workforce is capable of, we can achieve growth, strength, diversity, and success even if it is a few new jobs at a time. By building and caring for what we have now, growth for the future is a very real trend for Wayne County and the surrounding region. ■