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20-year-old landscaping firm battles tough economy



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OSCEOLA

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PHOTOS BY JIM CARCHIDI

2009 Year in Review

Florida experienced a lot of doom and gloom in 2009.

Its unemployment rate topped 11 percent this fall — the highest it's been since 1975, due to the Great Recession, the collapse of the construction industry and a sharp downturn in tourism.

The Sunshine State also took the No. 2 spot in the nation for

Layoffs, foreclosures, bankruptcies all worsened before glimmers of hope appeared toward year-end

the highest foreclosure rate, with one in every 165 homes getting a foreclosure filing in November. Florida posted 52,935 foreclosure filings that month.

Moreover, bankruptcy filings in Central Florida jumped 50 percent, from 38,714 cases in fiscal 2008 to 57,956 this year.

However, the leading indica-

tor of Florida's economic health turned positive in September for the first time in nearly three years, offering a tangible sign the state's battered economy soon will begin to recover. "Things are now getting better instead of worse," said Evangelos Simos, whose e-

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Osceola County project runs into trouble

BY ANJALI FLUKER

A partially developed 1,150-acre, \$1.5 billion master-planned vacation community in Osceola County is facing its second foreclosure auction.

Developer Maesbury Homes Inc. in 2007 started building its project approved for 4,000 resort condos, townhomes and single-family vacation homes, 325 hotel rooms, a middle school, and 591,000 square feet of retail and office space in the Westside community.

But the developer ran into trouble in 2008 when financing became scarce for buyers, said Helen Jones, vice president of sales. Af-

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Valencia board OKs land deal

BY MELANIE STAWICKI AZAM

Valencia Community College's district board of trustees on Dec. 15 unanimously approved paying \$5 million for 25 acres of land for a new Lake Nona campus.

The college initially wants to build a \$22 million, 85,000- to 100,000-square-foot facility, which would open in spring 2012.

Ultimately, Valencia plans to build 300,000 square feet total in three or four buildings at the new campus on the southeast Lake Nona campus to serve 8,500 students, said Valencia President Sanford "Sandy" Shugart.

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CAITLIN BATTERSBY

Cheryl and Rusty Woodall formed City Beautiful Landscaping in the midst of a recession in the 1980s. See Page 11.

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Executive Etiquette

A holiday party is the perfect time for a business to shine, show off and entertain clients, VIPs, associates and staff. Most of all, it's a time to say thank you and show appreciation.

Just don't forget that it's not a personal social event — it's about the business, and attendees are business associates and acquaintances.

Why are you there? You were invited by the business host because you are being thanked for your business or other contributions you have made.

Regardless of the reason for getting invited, be the best example of professionalism you can be.

Be certain you dress appropriately. Men may wear a festive tie in the spirit of the season, if it is understated and doesn't light up, curl up or wave. Women also should appear in professional business attire. Above all, show good taste and respect.

Here's some other holiday party tips:

- Don't spend too much time in one place, and remember to arrive a little late and exit early.

- Try not to invade another person's space by standing too close and watch the volume of your voice. Don't be too loud or become obnoxious.

- Don't talk with food in your mouth or stand in front of the food display and chat so others can't get to the chocolate-dipped strawberries.

- Never put your drink glass down on the food table, especially if it is empty. There are bus tables for that purpose. Carry your drink in your left hand so your right hand is always free, dry and ready for the handshake.

- Send a personalized, handwritten thank you note for being invited.

Remember the office holiday party is strictly business, in disguise.

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CAITLIN BATTERSBY

Cheryl and Rusty Woodall at a custom residential landscaping project under way in Windermere

Optimism cultivates Success

Landscaper stays positive in light of tough economy



Staying Power

Tales of business survival

BY JENNA REW

City Beautiful Landscaping was formed in the midst of a recession in the 1980s, so owner Russell "Rusty" Woodall believes his company is well-positioned to survive the latest economic downturn.

"This company was born out of the exact same times we are going through now," Woodall said. "I never focused on the economy, and I still don't."

Formed in 1989, the business has grown from lawn maintenance and simple installation projects to include outdoor lighting, carpentry, pond installation, paving services and pest control. "I started with a truck and a trailer and went from there," Woodall said, adding that as he got jobs, he financed equipment.

That's not to say that Woodall has not been affected by the latest recession. City Beautiful's revenue hit \$3.4 million in 2007, \$2.6 million in 2008, and Woodall projects \$1.9 million for 2009.

Woodall also has struggled with rising operating costs, as the price of gas and

City Beautiful Landscaping

Line of business: Landscaping

Headquarters: Orlando

Year founded: 1989

Top local executive: Russell "Rusty" Woodall, president

2008 revenue: \$2.6 million

Employees: 23

Contact: (407) 381-1910; www.citybeautifullandscaping.com

fertilizer doubled in 2008. While the price of gas dropped in recent months — from a high of more than \$4 in July to \$2.61 a gallon as of Dec. 15 — the cost of fertilizer has remained about the same.

Commercial projects bring in the most money for City Beautiful, even though the biggest hardship in landing this type of work has come from more pressure to bid lower to get new projects. As a result, Woodall quit bidding on projects not already operated by existing customers. Commercial projects used to comprise 70

percent of his business, but that has fallen to 50 percent. A typical commercial project that used to fetch \$100,000 now often goes for about \$30,000, Woodall said.

Despite his struggles, Woodall is optimistic about the future.

"We know margins are not going to be good with this kind of economy," he said. "So we are just going to live with a lower margin and do the best we can."

That means lower bids and doing more work to produce the same revenue.

Woodall also sought the help of the University of Central Florida's Small Business Development Center.

Staff there have provided him with a board of directors, which meets quarterly and focuses on how to streamline his business using better systems and creating a better work force. He has met with his board twice, with another four meetings scheduled during the next 18 months.

Woodall said the center and its volunteer board have helped him clean up his financial records. In fact, he said, he's spent more time on the company's financials in the last 90 days than in its entire history.

The SBDC also helped him refine company policies and operating procedures — moves he said will help him better market his businesses.

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