

November 15  
Bennington Banner

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**BENNINGTON** — As the holiday shopping season nears, Vermont retailers are eyeing the nation's economic climate closely.

The year has not been kind to major retailers, as many have voiced concern about the economy. Recently, Circuit City, a major electronics company, filed for bankruptcy protection.

Tasha Wallis, the executive director of the Vermont Retail Association, said there is a great deal of uncertainty. "I think the answer is we just don't know what's going to happen," Wallis said. "No one, though, has canceled Christmas."

She said retailers are expecting some decrease in sales from last year. "I think the consumers are still out there," Wallis said. "We might see more gifts that are necessities, though — like parents might wrap up a pair of boots their child needs and put it under the tree."

The smaller businesses of Vermont, she said, could be especially hard-hit by a lackluster holiday season. "One of the challenges is that a lot of downtown stores see 25 to 40 percent of their revenue come in this time of year," Wallis said. "The northern part of the state has seen a lot of Canadian shoppers because of their strong dollar, but that could be changing as well."

Wallis said she typically calls around to retailers in the state around this time of year. She characterized their overall mood as "cautiously optimistic."

Steve Hinchliffe, owner of Nature's Closet on Main Street, said he viewed the upcoming season with equanimity. "There are always concerns, but I'm cautiously optimistic about the upcoming season," Hinchliffe said. "These are tough times now, but for our business, the weather is an important factor."

Hinchliffe said business that handle necessities seem to be faring better. "I think it's definitely about the things people need," Hinchliffe said. "Customers are looking for quality products that will last them a lot of years."

Hinchliffe said he felt the weather and fuel prices could have a big impact on Vermont, as it sees an influx of tourists for the ski season. "It's hard to say what will happen with skiing this year," Hinchliffe said. "For people with second homes up here, it can be an inexpensive vacation, but we could see a decrease of weekend warriors."

“It’s hard to say if the two will balance out,” Hinchliffe added.

Ben Hauben, principal owner of the company that leases space to the Manchester Designer Outlets, said he was leery of looking into the future. “The whole country has challenges right now,” Hauben said. “We’ll see how it will impact our community as the season goes on.”

Hauben said outlets are well-positioned to weather the economic storm. “From what I understand, value price retailers, like Wal-Mart, and outlet stores, are doing well,” Hauben said. “I’m hoping we can benefit from that.”

Hauben, though, said visitors to the area are fewer now. “Overall, the traffic in the region seems to be down,” Hauben said. “Traffic in Vermont is down.”

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