

# Fort Smith Chamber Leader: Region Will End 2012 'On A Good Note' Despite Recent Struggles

by **Chris Bahn**

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FORT SMITH — Economic news in the Fort Smith region has, for the most part, been bleak of late.

[Whirlpool abandoned the city earlier this year](#) and left around 800 in the community without job. Unemployment hovered just under 8 percent for the most recent quarter. Home sales are in decline.

Still, Fort Smith Regional Chamber of Commerce COO Tim Allen delivered some promising news during an economic outlook luncheon Wednesday on the campus of the University of Arkansas at Fort Smith.

Allen said the chamber is actively involved with 12 projects, including three companies based internationally, that are interested in moving to the region. He couldn't offer specifics, but said the talks are proof that Fort Smith is due for some positive news in addition to [the recent relocation of Walther Arms](#).

"All of the 12 have made it beyond what I would call a 'Tier One' level," Allen said. "We're in the second and third level with some of these in negotiations for Fort Smith. ... We're ending the year on a pretty good note."

Fort Smith has traditionally been a manufacturing community, but Allen said it is important to look for businesses that aren't manufacturing-specific. Trying to lure "white collar, regional headquarters" is among the chamber's goals.

Allen said the chamber will soon be revamping the content of its website to more accurately "tell the story" of Fort Smith. He said outside perception doesn't match what the region actually has to offer, especially to non-manufacturing compaines.

Still, he said it's important not to forget the region's roots. Fort Smith's reputation as a manufacturing community could help set it apart from other cities vying for new companies or those looking to relocate.

"Every [community] has money. They have property," Allen said. "Not everyone has a workforce. That's usually how communities get cut. That's one thing we have unique to Fort Smith. We have a workforce. ... Those are the reasons people continue to be interested in us. We just need to tell our story a little bit better."

Allen said while efforts continue to attract new business to the region, he said a renewed emphasis will be placed on keeping jobs local. He estimated two-thirds of additional jobs created nationally are coming from existing businesses within communities and said retention will be key for Fort Smith.

"It's a constant battle," Allen said before adding: "It is a lot less expensive to focus on existing companies.:

Allen joined UAFS professor Kermit Kuehn and Kathy Deck of the University of Arkansas's Walton College of Business for a economic outlook report for the Fort Smith Region. Deck projected a continued national uptick in gross domestic product (GDP) of about 2 percent -- assuming the US avoids [the "fiscal cliff."](#)

Deck, who noted that retail and home sales are on the rise nationally, said the modest growth is a positive, though it's "not enough for us as a society to feel prosperous."

"We want to see some of that boring, modest growth," Deck said.

Kuehn's description of the most recent quarter for the Fort Smith region wasn't as positive overall, but he said looking at projections beyond 2012, "there is some optimism. There is a reason to feel better."