

The Advocate  
Baton Rouge, LA

Daily & Sunday  
(Dly 100,748; Sun 126,468)  
January 3, 2010

# Retail declines in 2009

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Baton Rouge shoppers tightened their fists in 2009, as retail spending drooped below 2008 levels almost the entire year.

Baton Rouge also saw the creation of its first cultural products districts, with districts being approved for downtown and Perkins Road and another in the works for Midcity.

The districts allow for tax credits for renovations of historic buildings and a sales tax exemption for works of art sold inside the district. The idea is to foster the development of arts and culture businesses in specific areas.

Spending by consumers and businesses in East Baton Rouge Parish spent \$6.22 billion for the first 10 months of the year, 4 percent less than the same period the year before.

The auto industry's woes continued, with two of the Big Three automakers needing a cash infusion from the federal government to stem billions in losses. And in the summer, the Obama administration unveiled the Cash for Clunkers program, in which the owners of qualifying vehicles could get up to \$4,500 toward a new, more fuel-efficient vehicle.



Advocate staff file photo  
by LIZ CONDO

Junked cars in a dumpster in front of the Royal Nissan car dealership advertised the 'Cash for Clunkers' vehicle trade-in program funded by the federal government.

While the program was extremely popular and was welcomed by car dealers, by the end of October auto sales in East Baton Rouge Parish were down 15 percent to \$452.6 million through the first 10 months of the year.

With the national economy still sluggish, there wasn't a lot new activity among the major

retailers. Large spots vacated by Linens N Things and Circuit city, both of which declared bankruptcy in 2008 and shut down locations around the Mall of Louisiana, were filled with furniture stores, though the CompUSA building along Bluebonnet Boulevard remains empty.

Mall of Louisiana owner General Growth Properties Inc. declared bankruptcy and announced a deal last month to refinance some debt. It's mall here was never indicated as one of its troubled properties.

Dottie Tarleton, a broker with Stirling Properties, said 2009 was a quiet year for retail development largely because of slumping consumer confidence and frozen capital markets, both of which meant dormant department stores and big-box retailers.

"Part of the problem is the big boxes just went into a holding pattern even though our economy was good ... they just shut it down," she said, noting smaller retailers in some segments — auto parts, dollar and grocery stores — were aggressive because of changes in consumer spending patterns.

"It was kind of a slow year, but 2010 is going to step it up a notch," she said. "It's already begun to happen."