Charitable donations perked up in 2010

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It's a sign economy is getting better

Residents gave a little bit more to charity in 2010, a small but hopeful sign that the economy may be picking up.

"(2009) was a really tough year, when businesses were laying off," said Ann Breidenstein, director of the United Way of St. Johns County, which funds 34 agencies and programs. "Things seemed to stabilize this year (2010)."

Breidenstein won't know until February if the campaign met its $1.25 million goal because all of totals aren't in yet.

But she knows they are at least 85 percent of the way despite having several campaigns and donations left to count.

"We're grateful that the campaigns have gone as well as they have," Breidenstein said. "I think it's going to be better next year."

The rebound in giving locally is reflecting what is happening nationally. Research released in May projected that national charitable giving would increase about 4.5 percent in 2010 after the previous year's donations fell by about 5 percent.

Officials for The Center on Wealth and Philanthropy at Boston College said they wouldn't know until February if that actually happened, but some nonprofits here think it has.

And they hope giving will increase even more in 2011.

The local Salvation Army has seen a slight increase in donations in 2010 but they, too, won't know how much of an increase for a few more weeks.

"For our Christmas season, our biggest time of the year ... we actually did better than last year" the organization's Capt. Jim Spencer said. "We did a little under $100,000 (in 2009) and (in 2010) we did over for our red kettle drive."

Spencer credits the giving with the economy turning around and with people's urge to help others during tough times.

"Even in hard times, people know there is that need even if they are having difficulties in their..."
own lives," he said. "They step forward."

Renee Morris, director of the St. Francis House homeless shelter, agreed.

She said that cash donations went up very little -- about $2,000 more than 2009's $186,000 -- but donations of goods and services went up by 25 percent.

In 2009, people donated about $600,000 worth of clothing, food and professional services.

This year, they donated $800,000 in in-kind donations.

Why?

"I think you would have to be underneath a rock to not know the country's hurting," she said. "People want to help but a lot of folks can't afford to donate cash so they donate what they can."

Despite the tough times, "The house is blessed," she said.

"It's a real struggle but God provides and He's been doing it for us," she said.

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