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Rochester economy expected to show improvement during 2010

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Four Rochester-area business leaders said today they expect that the local economy won't make a lot of waves in 2010 — and that would be a good thing, meaning the region would experience a slow but steady recovery from the recession.

Speaking to a luncheon meeting of the Rochester Rotary Club, executives from the automotive, real estate and banking industries, as well as an executive-in residence at Rochester Institute of Technology, said they're hopeful the region's employment picture will brighten this year.

"If we can stabilize employment ... and add a few jobs, consumers will be confident that they can pay their bills," said Robert Boehner of RIT. And once consumers feel secure, they're likely to spend a bit more than they did in 2009, he said.

Gary Keith, chief economist at M&T Bank, said he hopes that by the end of this year, the regional unemployment rate will be on a definite downward trend from the 7.6 percent level in November.

Keith and the other panelists pointed out that Rochester fared better than much of the country in 2009 during a very tough year economically. Part of that was due to the local real estate market, which held its value even as many metro areas in the U.S. saw sinking home prices.

Ryan Tucholski, CEO of the Greater Rochester Association of Realtors, said he anticipates a fairly strong housing market during the first half of 2010 as home buyers take advantage of federal tax credits.

Brad McAreavy, president of the Rochester Auto Dealers' Association, said a key factor for car sales this year will be the availability of credit. He said consumers shouldn't expect to see as many "crazy" incentives because automakers are cutting back on production and supply and demand will be in better balance.

The session at the Riverside Convention Center was moderated by Sandy Parker, CEO of the Rochester Business Alliance, who said she thinks 2010 will be another challenging year for the regional economy. "But we're well-positioned to weather it," she said.