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## ***Economic Trends* predicts continued growth**

*Economic Trends*, a quarterly publication of the St. Tammany Economic Development Foundation, shows mixed directions in the parish's economy, but an overall upward movement in the Composite Growth Index for the first quarter of 2008, according to Brenda Reine-Bertus, STEDF executive director.

The unemployment rate for the first quarter was 2.9 percent in St. Tammany, which is down from 3.1 percent in the fourth quarter of 2007 and well below the overall unemployment rate for 2007 of 3.7 percent. Local unemployment was lower than the national (5.1 percent) and Louisiana (4.5 percent) rates for the first quarter of 2008.

Retail sales were 3.2 percent lower than in the first quarter of 2007, dropping from

\$49,678,759 to \$48,066,975. Sales tax revenue fell from \$1,041,500 to \$1,007,700. Retail sales and sales-tax collection were down 11.1 percent from the fourth quarter of 2007, which reflects holiday sales surges and follows a similar pattern from previous calendar years.

Housing permits and home sale prices also fell in the first quarter, in part due to the national slowdown in the housing market and the stabilization or correction in housing prices since the artificial inflation caused by Hurricane Katrina, the report shows. Home sales fell 28.1 percent in dollar value from the first quarter of 2007 and 25.5 percent in sales volume. The average sale price, however, rose from \$234,925 to \$243,182 in quarterly comparison.

Despite retail and housing indicators, 379 new businesses have been launched so far this year, which is down only 1.8 percent from 386 in the first quarter of 2007.

More than \$1 billion in new projects were announced in early 2008, including the Nord du Lac project near Covington and the Fremaux Summit project in Slidell. The total investment of announced new projects is \$1,134,630,900, bringing an estimated annual payroll of \$6.14 million with 179 new permanent jobs and 2,720 construction jobs.

"Even with housing and retail slowdowns, the outlook is very good," Reine-Bertus said. "The low unemployment rate and high number of new businesses bodes well for St. Tammany's continued growth."