

Survey says: Business is better so far this year

By ROGER BUTTON BUSINESS COLUMNIST VENICE GONDOLIER

Merchants in Venice are reporting that 2011 has started with encouraging signs. The general perception is shoppers are more relaxed and willing to make purchases than they were a year ago.

“There have been more people and interest in our products this year,” said Kathy Crisman, co-owner of Dick’s Shoes, 219 W. Venice Ave.

She reports sales up 30 percent with shoppers spending a lot more freely.

“They appear to have more confidence and are probably tired of being frugal,” she said.

Bob Daley, president of Freedom Boat Club, 990 Laguna Drive, is delighted his business almost doubled, with an 80 percent increase in January compared to year ago, when the weather was bad. Although February is a short month, there has been another 30 percent increase.

“However,” he said, “my biggest concern is the price of fuel caused by problems in the Middle East as it will add 50-75 cents a gallon to our fuel.”

At the Hampton Inn & Suites, 881 Venetia Bay Blvd., Patricia Cain, general manager, said February reservations were up slightly but the weather was very bad up north for the first 10 days of the month and some guests were unable to get here. The good news is that bookings for March are very strong. Last summer the hotel was renovated and its business and fitness centers are being upgraded this year.

“Business is very, very good,” said Compton Cramer, owner of Cramer Toyota and Cramer Honda on South U.S. 41 Bypass.

New-vehicle sales have increased 25 percent for Honda and 22 percent for Toyota this year compared to 2010. Pre-owned-vehicle sales for both dealerships increased 20 percent, and service volume for Honda is up 50 percent with a 25 percent increase for Toyota.

“It seems people are much more confident and at ease spending money on large purchases,” he said.

The growth segment is small sports utility vehicles, and hybrids have been in demand because of their advantageous gas mileage. He has added five salespeople for Toyota and three for Honda.

“It felt like I was making good progress last year, but this year, beginning last month, leasing has taken off,” said Tom Trammell III, president and managing partner of The Venice Co., 101 W. Venice Ave., Suite 25.

When he hung a “For Lease” sign in the window of one of his units it used to take 100 days to find a tenant. This February he had five units available, and within a week he had three takers. Three weeks later only one unit was still available.

“I have just sold another one,” said Ann Jiganti, a 25-year Realtor with Coldwell Banker who specializes in the Calusa Lakes community in Nokomis.

January was her best month in four years, she said, noting that the hesitation is gone and people buying. Calusa is a stable market of 578 homes with only 18 on the market, and she has nine under contract.

Prices have not gone up, sellers are more realistic and buyers feel they are getting value for their dollars, she said. The last four years have been very stressful, she said, “but now I can see the light at the end of the tunnel.”

Reports from the retail service industry indicate this year is a lot better than 2010, said John Ryan, president and CEO of the Venice Area Chamber of Commerce. Chamber employees report phenomenal walk-in traffic.

“We are getting day-trippers and others checking out Venice and picking up information on next season’s rentals,” he said.