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United Way makes case for giving in tough times

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Staff Writer

Want to go?

What: Family Night at the Ball Park campaign kickoff for the United Way of Greater Greensboro, with food, carnival games and music.

When: 5-7 p.m. Tuesday

Where: NewBridge Bank Park

Information: 378-5037

GREENSBORO - Several longtime enthusiasts of the United Way, including former Greensboro City Manager Ed Kitchen, recently called on 150 companies whose employees are regular contributors to the nonprofit's annual campaign.

This year, more than ever, they wanted a sense of what to expect from upcoming company campaigns, the heart of the agency's fundraising. The nonprofit, which in recent years has put 88 cents of every dollar raised back into the local community, helps support community agencies, including Family Services of the Piedmont and Guilford Child Development. And this year, there's been a rise in the need for services from agencies.

"We've got a few companies that are doing well and are setting higher goals," said Kitchen, the chairman of the upcoming campaign, which will kick off Tuesday with a family night at NewBridge Bank Park, home of the Greensboro Grasshoppers.

The kickoff comes amid a struggling economy marked by job layoffs, the unusual increase in gas prices at week's end and wealthier givers keeping an eye on the stock market.

"When you add all that up, we probably could have made a case for less than last year," said Kitchen of the \$13 million figure the nonprofit's board settled on with a lot of discussion and a bit of hope.

"If you were a business and making decisions with your head, you would lower it," Kitchen said. "But, if you are working with your heart, you don't."

Also at \$13 million, last year's goal was 1.5 percent more than the previous year - a \$200,000 increase.

Anything less might send the wrong signal, said Keith Barsuhn, the recently hired president of the nonprofit. He came to Greensboro from Canton, Ohio, a "Rust Belt" community hemorrhaging the jobs that historically provided the local United Way with funding.

One in three people in the community receives services from United Way affiliated agencies, estimates show, whether it's overnight shelter through the American Red Cross or comfort through Hospice at Greensboro.

"Everyone says if you can make the case ... people will respond," Barsuhn said of Greensboro's charitable community.

So he's working on a multipronged program. One is aimed at retirees who may have given to the United Way through payroll deduction, but maybe no one has kept up with them in retirement. Another is identifying midsize or smaller companies that don't participate.

"You learn to value that \$3,000 campaign from 25 employees," Barsuhn said.

Barsuhn has signed up more than a dozen businesses, with hopes to raise to at least 30, that would offer discounts for people using a "care card" they would receive for making a minimum \$120 donation to the annual campaign.

The nonprofit is also rolling out a public-relations campaign that features ACC mascots. Another gives faces to the people helped by agencies that receive United Way funds.

Unlike in previous years, the campaign will end the Friday before Thanksgiving. In the past, campaigns lingered into spring with some companies finishing campaigns months before totals are announced.

"We took a lot of emotion out of the campaign," Barsuhn said of the longer pledge period, "a lot of enthusiasm."

The nonprofit has been working to get back to fundraising levels before Sept. 11, 2001, when the group regularly raised close to \$15 million annually.

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