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COPING IN THE DOWNTURN

YOUR STORIES



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Karen Sullivan and Asheesh Pathak, owners of the Gateway Village Bojangles'/Donatos pizza, inside their store on July 15.

Fried chicken keeps these friends afloat

Fast food usually is the last industry to take a hit in a downturn, says a Bojangles' co-owner.

Has an uncertain economy dulled Charlotteans' cravings for sweet tea, fried chicken and biscuits? It sure doesn't seem like it, say friends Asheesh Pathak and Karen Sullivan, owners of a new Bojangles' franchise near uptown.

"I think what it really comes down to, no matter how the economy is, fast food is usually the last place the economy takes a hit," Pathak said. "People will cut down on fine dining and casual dining a lot sooner than (not spending) \$1.50 on a biscuit."

They opened the store in May, but met about 14 years ago when both worked at a South-Park restaurant. In April 2007, they found a location for a Bojangles' in Gateway Village

near Johnson & Wales University.

Though the economy has soured since then, they felt confident moving forward, in part because of strong sales at another Bojangles' that Pathak owns, at Fifth and Tryon streets. There, sales have increased every year since the store's 2003 opening, and were up 20 percent in 2007.

Higher food and gas prices mean it's more expensive to make a biscuit than it was a year ago. Chicken prices have fluctuated.

However, Pathak and Sullivan say their store is already attracting regulars, and they're comforted that it's part of a 400-plus restaurant chain with 59 straight months of same-store sales growth.

In a downturn, they said, businesses need to focus on their strengths. In their case, that's - well, you can probably smell it already. — JEN ARONOFF