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Small business operators feel warming economy coming

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Lucky for William Gerhardt that he diversified his landscaping company last year, because when the economic slowdown hit with

full force, corporate clients were calling his firm for maintenance work - not the big jobs the company had once enjoyed.

For five years running, 30 percent of GreenScapes Landscape Architects & Contractors' revenue

was corporate contracts, but the company just 10 percent business revenue this summer.

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Leader Technologies Inc. has received approval for a state tax break that would help the company hire 153 workers and complete a 38,000-square-foot office expansion.

"We've been in an intensive research-and-development phase, and the product is essentially built now so the growth will come from acquiring new customers," said Michael T. McKibben, Leader's chief executive officer.

The company has developed Web services computer software for business communication.

Its Leader2Leader product gives business users one tool for e-mail, teleconferencing, videos, instant messaging, Internet chat and group voting.

The LeaderPhone product is an audio conferencing service that allows for call setup and administration via a Web browser or hand-held wireless device.

And the company has another product that is expected to be launched this year - Leader Smart Camera Security System, a remote event-monitoring service that can

send messages and digital images through a phone or remote wireless device.

Leader is operating under a cooperative research agreement with a laboratory engaged in homeland defense initiatives on this project and has an exclusive license.

McKibben is looking in Westerville for space for the office expansion that will consist of a customer service center, network operating center, office suites and R&D space.

Leader now operates in 5,500 square feet on Eastwind Drive in that city.

The company also is expected to lease 1,000 square feet in Columbus and install server and network equipment at the site.

As part of the seven-year, 65 percent tax credit, the company is required to maintain operations at the expanded office in Westerville for 14 years.

Leader also must retain 24 positions and the 154 new employees, to be hired over the next three years, would work in computer programming, customer service and sales.

The average hourly wage of the new jobs will be \$29.75, plus \$6.50 in benefits.

As part of the expansion, Leader is expected to spend \$1.24 million on new computer and server equipment.

