

## Lehigh Valley forecaster: 'Our winter will be mild, drier'

By **STACY WESCOE**  
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Cliff Babin of Cliff's Snow Plowing in Allentown doesn't want to hear it, but an Eastern Pennsylvania firm is predicting a mild winter for the Lehigh Valley this year.

"I just bought four tons of salt, so I hope it does something," said Babin.

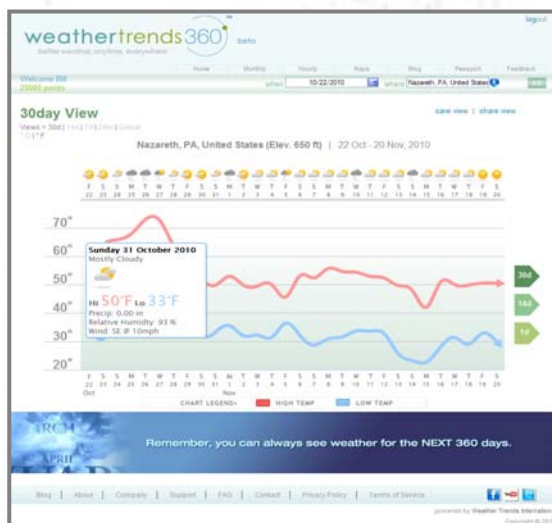
But according to Bill Kirk, CEO and co-founder of Weather Trends International in Bethlehem, Babin may be holding on to a lot of that salt until early 2011.

According to the firm's long-range forecast, the rest of October through December should be relatively mild and dry — especially when compared to last winter, which saw a near record-breaking 60-plus inches of snow. Kirk said this year most of the colder weather, and most of the snow and ice will come later in the season, closer to March.

Babin said he's already sent out his contracts to both his commercial and residential customers, and he usually gets about the same response no matter what kind of winter is predicted. However, "if it doesn't snow all winter, I don't make anything," said Babin, who charges per job.

For Michael Sterschic of Discover Lehigh Valley, the convention

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The screen grab shows a page on [www.weathertrends360.com](http://www.weathertrends360.com), a website that Weather Trends International, Bethlehem, launched recently.

# WEATHER

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and visitors bureau for the region, the forecast sounds perfect for the tourism industry.

"It needs to be cold enough to make snow, but it needs to be nice enough to get around," said Sterschic. "The ideal (winter) would be for it to be below freezing at night, but nice during the day so people want to do outdoor shopping in our downtowns."

Tina Kisela, manager of the Promenade Shops at Saucun Valley, an outdoor lifestyle center, said the prediction was good news for her.

"The weather is a very big focus for us. We start watching it closely in October," Kisela said.

Not only are people more attracted to outdoor shopping when the weather is mild, very few people head to the stores at all when there is a bad weather event. "Unless you sell milk and bread," she quipped.

But it's not just a decrease in sales that Kisela has to be concerned about, it's also the logistics of getting the shopping center ready for customers.

"You have to clear the sidewalks and clear out parking spaces for the capacity crowds that we get prior to Christmas," she said.

That snow clearing is no easy task, nor is it cheap. The center has to contract with snow removers, like Babin, to make sure everything is safe and clear in time for their stores' opening.

She said if the worst precipitation doesn't come until February or March, as Weather Trends has predicted, that would be ideal, because that is when the stores tend to be slower, anyway.

Still, Lauren Wren at the Split Rock Resort in the Poconos, is hoping for some snow. She said her hotel, which is situated between the Jack Frost and Big Bolder ski resorts, draws much of its clientele from New York City.

"People from the city don't think of skiing unless they actually see snow," she said. But she doesn't want a repeat of last year when there was so much snow people couldn't travel to get to the resort.

For many in the construction industry, this year's weather report is having less of an impact than in years past. Ron Jerdon, vice president and general manager of Ondra-Huyett Construction, Allentown, said normally a rough winter would impact productivity, increase the risk of accidents and postpone certain work that would be affected by soil conditions or moisture levels.

But because of the economy, he said this year is different.

"We're seeing more opportunities in interior renovations," said Jerdon. He said those aren't affected by the weather like the larger outdoor projects firms like his would normally handle. So, as far as his business is concerned — let it snow.

## Will weather site attain Facebook fame?

Bill Kirk, co-founder and CEO of Weather Trends International in Bethlehem, said he'd like to be the next Mark Zuckerberg.

As chronicled in the recently released movie, "The Social Network," Zuckerberg became a young billionaire after founding the website, Facebook. Kirk said Zuckerberg became a success by giving the public something they wanted — a way to connect with friends in a casual social setting online.

Kirk said one thing everyone is always interested in is the weather, and so he thinks his new website, [www.weather-trends360.com](http://www.weather-trends360.com), will be to weather what Facebook was to social networking.

Launched on Sept. 23, the site has already gathered over 6,700 members and has had

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more than 100,000 hits.

The site gives 360-day advance weather predictions for free to registered members. To become registered an individual has to provide their name, email address, city and birth date.

The information provided by the website is a scaled down version of the advance weather reports for which the firm charges customers like Wal-Mart and AutoZone between \$50,000 and \$200,000 a year. The site provides basic information such as whether a day is likely to be sunny, rainy or snowy and what the maximum range of high and low temperatures will be for a day.

"It's simplified," explained Kirk. "Consumers' heads would blow off if they saw all the data we provide for our corporate customers."

He said the information on the new website can be used for women trying to choose a wedding day, or a family trying to plan a vacation.

"I've already received over 100 emails from brides telling me how great they think this is," he said.

The idea to have a public website came from personal weather reports he did for the owners and executives of some of the corporations his firm was servicing.

He said he's helped executives pick out dates for their children's weddings or for corporate golf outings. He even helped Steven Busch III of Anheuser Busch Companies Inc. plan a six-week vacation that took him from St. Louis to Hawaii, Alaska and China.

"We've proved that this works," said Kirk. He said that although he may not be right 100 percent of the time, he helps people drastically improve the odds that the weather will be good for their big event.

And that he said is something that has value — even though he's not charging for it. Ultimately, Kirk said he wants the website to generate revenue in much the same way Facebook does with sponsorships and advertising. Kirk's goal is to have 1 million users within six months.

Stacy Wescoe

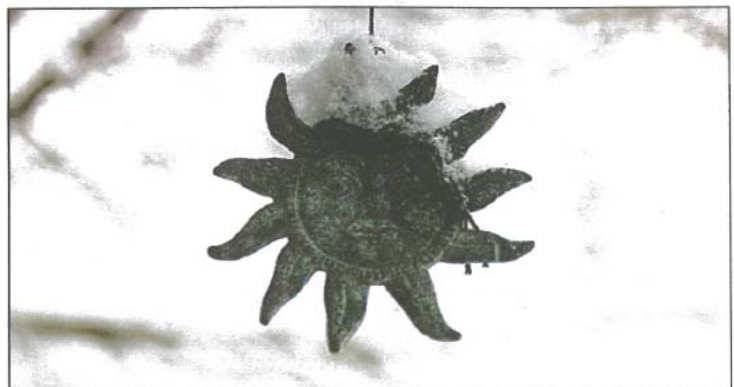


Photo by Stacy Wescoe  
Snow gathers on a tarnished copper sun wind chime during one of last year's severe snow storms. A Lehigh Valley forecaster is expecting a much milder winter this season.