19.2% INCREASE

JANUARY HOME SALES OFFER HOPES FOR REBOUND IN 2012



Mark Bunnell and Kimberly Simpson stand in the yard of their recently purchased home on East Hillcrest Drive in Greenville on Tuesday. MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/STAFF

By Angelia Davis
Staff writer
davisal@greenvilleonline.com

Mark Bunnell and his fiancee, Kimberly Simpson, starting thinking about buying their first home in January 2011. But it wasn't until last month that they made their purchase.

Wendy and Dale Bellert also closed on a home in Greer in January after relocating due to a job transfer.

The couples were among the dozens who gave the Greenville metro area real estate market a mid-winter boost by pushing home sales up 19.2 percent in January, compared with the same month a year ago.

Nick Sabatine, chief executive officer of the Greater Greenville Association of Realtors, said sales are up, overall because "things are picking up."

"It's not only shown by our report but our members are telling me that they had busy Januarys and they are encouraged by the activity," Sabatine said.

The association's statistics show that last year 6,395 residences were sold in Greater Greenville (which includes Pickens and Laurens counties) compared to 6,530 in 2010.

Inventory dropped 14.6 percent, from 6,460 on Feb. 10, 2011, to the current 5,514 units. Both the average and median prices for homes rose.

Year to date, sales volume was up 23.5 percent, which reflects the average price climbing 3.6 percent, with the median price up 5.1 percent.

Bunnell, whose job is in technology, and Bellert, a stay-at-home mom, don't credit their decisions to become new homeowners to an improving economy as much as mortgage rates near record lows.

Bunnell, 29, said the motivation for him and his future wife was good real estate agents at Prudential C. Dan Joyner Real Estate Co. and "incredibly low interest rates."

"You're not going to beat the rates that they have these days," he said. "They are tremendously low."

Bellert said when her husband's new job as a robotics maintenance technician brought them to Greenville in October, he was allowed to live in corporate housing for three

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Area home sales looking up



Greater Greenville* home sales were up 19.2 percent in January, compared to the same time last year.

	Units	Avg. price	Med. price	Avg. DOM
2012	404	$180,187	$143,000	107
2011	339	$173,838	$136,000	111
	+19.2%	+3.6%	+5.1%	-3.7%

* Greater Greenville includes Pickens and Laurens counties

Source: Greater Greenville Association of Realtors

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months. After that, the couple, who have a six-year-old son, had to decide whether to rent an apartment or buy a house.

Although their home in Columbia hasn't sold yet, they chose to go ahead and buy one here because, "Either way we were going to have to fork out a good amount of money every month, and we might as well put it toward our own home," said Bellert, who worked with real estate agents at Coldwell Banker Caine.

"I'm seeing it (the economy) get a little better. My husband does have a good job, and we're very thankful for that. The Realtors I've been speaking with are telling me that January and February have been so busy for them.

"So, hopefully, someone will buy it (their house) soon so we don't have to keep making two mortgage payments. I'm hoping by spring that people will be buying more since the weather will be better and people will be in a happier mood."

Winter months tend to be slower sales months for home sales.

But Sabatine doesn't believe the unseasonably warm temperatures this winter have necessarily been the driver behind home sales.

Sales were up 7.6 percent last December compared to December 2010.

"People may have gotten an early start on spring with the weather being nice, but I don't think people wake up one day and say, 'Oh. It's a beautiful day. Let's go buy a house,'" he said.

Instead, he said, the bulk of the activity has likely been triggered by improving unemployment numbers and the increase in jobs.

"When unemployment is down, housing seems to go up," he said.

The state's unemployment rate fell to 9.5 percent in December 2011.

It is at its lowest rate since December 2008, when unemployment was at 9.2 percent, according to the South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce.

While home sales here look more positive than they did a year ago, Sabatine said the key going forward is seeing what trend develops in the spring.

"If spring is strong, I see promise as far as the rest of 2012," he said.