Foreclosures on rise in Oconee

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SENECA — The number of foreclosures in Oconee County has increased in recent months, with county and bank officials blaming a backlog of cases from earlier in the year that are now coming due.

Oconee County Clerk of Court Beverly Whitfield said the first nine months of 2012 saw an average of 17 to 20 foreclosures per month. That number rose to 23 in October and jumped to 42 foreclosures scheduled for November, as opposed to 17 in November 2011.

Whitfield said the recent spike could be related to an administrative order handed down by S.C. Supreme Court Chief Justice Jean H. Toal in May of 2011, which requires lending agencies to make extra efforts to negotiate conditions of loans to seek to prevent foreclosures.

Whitfield said many of those cases have now exhausted all possible means to avoid foreclosure and are being added to the regular number of foreclosures to cause the increase. She said she would expect the county figures to be high again in December.

Ken Miller, vice president of Oconee Federal Savings and Loan Association, agreed that Justice Toal's ruling held back some foreclosures until now.

"When the ruling came down, everything came to a halt," Miller said.

He said his bank has had 11 foreclosures in the past year, well below the national average.

"Our lending practices are different," he said. "We only loan in Oconee County and we drive by and see the collateral for the loan."

Fred Shepherd, president of Community First Bank, agreed that the increase in the past two months is not from a new hit in the housing market.

"Our bank is not experiencing additional foreclosures; in fact, I think we might be down some," said Shepherd.

Shepherd said Toal's ruling has likely helped some families avoid foreclosure.

"I'm sure it has helped some," said Shepherd. "But, we and most of the county banks have been in the business of trying to work with people. If we can do anything to help someone avoid foreclosure, we try to help."

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