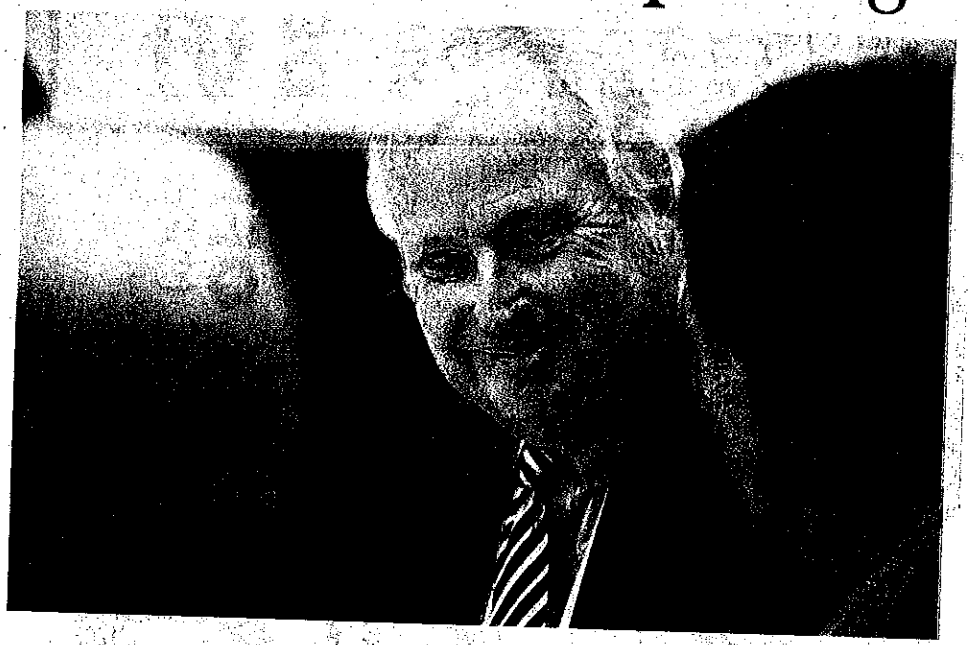
Home builders' outlook improving

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Jerry Howard, CEO of the National Association of Home Builders in Washington, DC, was guest speaker for the annual meeting Thursday of the organization's Greenville County affiliate.

Local home builders who gathered for a trade association meeting Thursday said they're seeing an improving market.

Joe Hoover, owner of Hoover Custom Construction of Taylors, said he and most of the contractors he knows are "pretty busy."

"People definitely are getting off the couches and making decisions to move forward on things," Hoover said.

The only problem, he said, is finding lots to build on.

"No one has developed land in Greenville for quite a few years," Hoover said.

He was one of the contractors gathered at the TD Convention Center on Thursday for the annual meeting of the Home Builders Association of Greenville.

Special guest was Jerry Howard, chief executive officer of the National Association of Home Builders in Washington, D.C.

Michael Dey, executive vice president of the Greenville association, which counts about 300 companies as members, said the local market is improving quickly, though it still hasn't returned to pre-recession levels.

Greenville County builders are working at about 60 percent of the "normal" pace of 2003, when they obtained about 4,000 building permits, Dey said.

The Greenville market today is producing about 2,800 permits a month, he said, with the pace expected to hit 3,400 permits a month next year.

Dey said a surge in housing prices indicates plenty of demand.

He said the builders he's talked with over the last couple of months are "all planning to ramp up further in the next year, adding new subdivisions, adding capacity, planning more starts."

"We're going to continue to see that improve, but it's still a couple of years away before we hit a normal market," Dey said.

Across the Upstate, the number of building permits per month for single family housing has nearly doubled since 2009, said Dave Watcher, owner of Construction Week, a market research firm in Charleston.

Watcher said the average number of monthly permits through the first 10 months of the year for the five Upstate counties rose from 1,650 in 2009 to 3,297 this year.