# Hope rises for 2013 home sales

BY NORMAN CANNADA
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Local officials say they are optimistic about the prospects for an improving housing market in 2013 after 2012 ended with a gradual upswing in new home starts and new home sales.

"I am optimistic about 2013," said Kevin Cope, broker-in-charge for First Choice Realty in Seneca and chairman of the board of directors for the Western Upstate Association of Realtors. "Most of the brokers seem to be up over last year and that is a good indication.

Pending sales increased 1.5 percent overall from December 2011 to November 2012 in the Western Upstate region, which includes, Oconee, Pickens and Anderson counties. The price range with the largest increase was the $350,001 and above range, which increased 5.9 percent. The overall median sale price rose 2.1 percent during the same time period.

Cope said Greenville County has seen higher increases in new home sales because of new industries, which have recently come to the Greenville area. He added that he expects the efforts by Richard Blackwell, executive director of the Oconee County Planning and Development Commission, and others to bring new industry to Oconee County to help increase new home sales in 2013.

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"We have some positive things happening in Oconee County with the new hotel and some empty buildings being bought," said Cope. "I've seen what Richard Blackwell has been doing and the potential for new industry coming into the county. Anytime you have new industry, those people are going to need a place to live."

Permits for new homes increased from 145 in 2011 to 179 in 2012. Josh Stephens, county zoning administrator said the increase in permits included 25 new home permits in December, a higher number than usual for that time of the year.

"It was not a normal December," Stephens said. "The totals are up, but it's still slow going. It's been gradual. We've seen progress. I think 2013 is going to be a strong year."

Stephens said he is concerned about reports that banks are still hesitant to lend money.

"We're still hearing people say that it is more difficult to get a loan now," he said. "We are still not seeing banks lending more and loosening up on lending money. They are not turning money loose."

Fred Shepherd, president of Community First Bank in Seneca, said banks have "tightened up" on the credit quality of applicants, but do have money available for home loans.

"We have money to lend, all banks have money to lend," Shepherd said. "We're looking for good loans. Right now the demand is off. We're expecting some slight increase in demand in 2013."

Ken Miller, vice president of Oconee Federal Savings and Loan Association, said he has heard customers say that online banks have not been lending money, but said Oconee Federal has continued to have money to loan.

"We've always had money to loan; that hasn't changed," he said. Miller added that loans are more difficult for those who lost a home to bankruptcy during the housing crisis or have other credit problems.

He said those without credit problems should find getting a home loan is not more difficult.

Miller said he hopes income tax returns in 2013 will give first-time homebuyers the money they will need for down payments, allowing them to seek a home loan.

He said he will feel that the housing market has made a comeback "when the everyday worker at Walmart and Kentucky Fried Chicken comes in to buy his first home."

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