Hot rental market scorches Upstate



As home loans become tougher to come by because of tighter lending restrictions and purchasing a home becomes more difficult, the demand for rental properties is rising.

Foreclosures, weak economy drive trend in Oconee, Pickens

BY CARLOS GALARZA
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SENECA — Amy Callahan, the leasing agent at the 144-unit Companion at Crescent Pointe apartment complex in Seneca, never had it so good.

Life is good for Callahan and Companion, 1500 S. Oak St., with occupancy up above 90 percent, she said Friday.

The apartment complex that opened its doors seven years ago is home to a cross-section of professional and blue-collar renters, including teachers, police officers, firefighters and office workers, Callahan said.

"We get workers from Duke Energy, Sandvik, BorgWarner and other major companies," she said. "We're very convenient to a lot of people."

The rental market in Oconee and Pickens County is on fire.

Mike Hill, who oversees the rental component of Bob Hill Realty, Inc. in Seneca, said people in the area are "flooding the rental market."

Hill said most of the rental properties he shows are in the $1,200 to $1,500 price range. He shows condos, town homes and single-family homes but stays clear of apartments.

"Our least expensive rent is $800," Hill said.

The local spike in the rental market appears to be part of a national trend linked to a record-breaking number of foreclosures being filed and the lingering economic malaise.

"The main thing is that there are a lot of people who have foreclosed, and their credit report hurt their chances of getting a home loan," Hill said. "People are forced to rent."

Third-quarter 2010 foreclosure filings, including default notices, scheduled auctions and bank repossessions, were reported on more than 930,000 properties in the United States, which was an increase of almost 4 percent over the previous quarter, RealtyTrac reported Friday. Oconee County had 306 foreclosures, and Pickens County added 677 foreclosures during the third quarter, RealtyTrac reported.

Spencer Wilson, a Seneca developer who has been fixing and upgrading depressed properties and flipping them for profit, has been hurt by the bad economy.

Unable to sell a refurbished house at Fourth and Depot streets, Wilson was forced to rent it out to a family with an option to buy.

"People aren't buying," Wilson said. "It's been rough."

While finding qualified homebuyers has not been easy for real estate professionals, renters appear to be lining up eager to sign a lease.

Burton Properties Management, LLC, which has developed and managed 11 apartment communities in Oconee and Pickens counties near Clemson University, has put away the vacancy signs.

"We have a total of 800 units, and every one is filled," Lex Burton said.

OCONEE HOUSING PROFILE

Total units: 37,109
Occupied units: 29,464 (79.4%)
Owner occupied: 22,437 (76.2%)
Median home value: $121,700
Renter occupied: 7,027 (23.8%)
Median rental: $549

Source: U.S. Census 2006-08 American Community Survey

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