

BUSINESS

Local home sales inch up

Number of units sold in Greenville area continues to climb each month

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Home sales in Greater Greenville appear to be making a slow but steady comeback.

Sales in this region have been inching up month by month this year, with the number of units sold consistently climbing from 339 in January to 572 in May, according to the Greater Greenville Association of Realtors.

"The good thing about this is it bucks the trends with the rest of the country," said Nick Sabatine, chief executive officer of the local trade group. "I think the old saying that all real estate is local is really true in the Upstate."

Nationwide, existing-home sales have been underperforming by historical standards but are expected to rise "gradually but unevenly," said Lawrence Yun, chief econo-

mist of the National Association of Realtors.

A problem, Yun said, is "the continuation of unnecessarily tight credit standards that are keeping many creditworthy buyers from getting a loan despite extraordinarily low default rates over the past two years."

He said if credit requirements returned to normal, safe standards, home sales would be 15 to 20 percent higher.

Sales may be trending up locally by the month, but they're still lower than they were last year.

Greenville MLS stats show sales from January to May 2011 were 12.2 percent below what they were the same period of 2010. Sales were down 15 percent last month compared to May 2010.

Greenville, like many areas nationwide, saw a spike in homes sales early last year because of the federal first-time homebuyer tax credit and other incentives.

When the incentives ended, home sales here declined, Sabatine said.

Employment is the real key to improvements in

the housing market, said Sabatine and Michael Dey, executive vice president of the Greenville Home Builders Association.

"I've always thought that when unemployment goes down, housing starts, housing prices and the housing market will go up, and that's what's happening," Sabatine said.

South Carolina's unemployment rate went down in April for the fourth month in a row to 9.8 percent. And for the eight consecutive month, the state's employment estimates rose.