New home construction on 'gradual' upswing

BY NORMAN CANNADA
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New home construction and building additions are on the upswing in Oconee County, but a county official cautioned that the improvements are "gradual."

"We're seeing increases across the board," said Josh Stephens, county zoning administrator. "It's not as much as we would like, but we are improving gradually."

Stephens said 149 building permits have been issued for new home construction in the county so far this year, with two months to go, compared with a total of 145 building permits in 2012. Nearly one-third of the 2012 permits were issued in March and April.

Stephens said many of those February and March permits were for housing at a new development called The Pier, which has about 30 cottages designed for Clemson students. The development is located just inside the Oconee County line about three miles from the university.

In the city of Seneca, there have been nine building permits for new construction issued so far this year, compared with 11 for all of 2011, according to records at the city's planning department.

Russell Price, executive director of the Oconee County Homebuilder's Association, said the slight increases in new home construction this year makes him more confident about 2013.

"Next year is looking like it is going to be a good year," said Price. "That will depend some on what happens in the election."

He added that continued gradual increases in new construction would help economic development in the county.

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"There's not going to be a boom next month, but if we keep improving gradually, we will get back to those pre-2008 levels," he said.

"The biggest issue is financing. Banks are not lending as much because the regulations won't let them."

Price agreed that financing and government regulation of bank loans are holding back some construction.

"It's hard to get a loan, even if you have good credit," Price said. "We are hearing that the regulations are beginning to loosen a little bit. It would be nice if they would loosen a lot."

Stephens said remodeling and additions to current houses are heavier than new home construction.

Andy Lee, owner of Lake Keowee Real Estate, said he is beginning to see an increase in the housing market.

"This past quarter (July-September) was much busier than what we have seen and the second quarter (April-June) is usually our busiest time of the year," said Lee. "I definitely think the market is improving."

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