Oconee, Pickens lag in new housing activity

Year-to-date permits drop compared to first quarter 2011

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WALHALLA — New housing activity is gaining momentum in the Upstate, but Oconee and Pickens are not riding its coattails.

A recently released residential building permit report reflects solid first quarter gains for most of the Upstate.

However, the number of permits pulled in Oconee through the first three months of 2012 fell almost 32 percent when compared with the first quarter of 2011.

New housing activity was even more discouraging in Pickens County with a 60 percent drop in permits pulled when compared with the first three months of last year.

Contractors pulled 56 permits in Oconee during the first quarter, or 26 less than at the same time last year. Pickens County saw 44 permits pulled in the first quarter, a drop of 67 from a year ago.

Russ Price, executive officer at the Oconee Home Builders Association, said he is hopeful that the number of new housing starts will improve in Oconee and Pickens.

"From what I'm hearing, there are encouraging signs," Price said. "April numbers that I've seen look good."

Price said he's hearing from builders that more people are having plans drawn up, which is an indicator of future activity.

"I'm hopeful for everybody's sake," Price said.

Oconee County Planning Director Art Holbrooks said that with the job market getting better, he's optimistic it will eventually be reflected in the new housing market.

Referring to the Building Permits Department, Holbrooks said: "They are busier next door."

Oconee building permit reports during the first three weeks of April show new residential activity is picking up. To date, 27 housing construction permits have been issued valued at $4.6 million.

Greenville County registered 447 residential building permits in the first quarter, a 63 percent jump over the same period in 2011. Anderson County recorded 88 permits, a spike of almost 110 percent over the first quarter last year.

Dale Akins of The Market Edge, a Knoxville, Tenn.-based company that compiles residential building permit reports for select counties in the Upstate of South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Indiana and Kentucky, said "all the markets experienced an increase," except for some individual counties in each area.

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FILE PHOTO

Construction of The Pier student cottages is expected to generate more residential building activity in Oconee County in the coming months. However, year-to-date new housing permits fell during the first quarter compared to the same period a year ago.