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Housing still depressed



JOHN C. STEVENSON / Staff

Pickens County saw a slight increase in revenues from building-permit fees in the last quarter of 2009 from the same period of 2008, which indicates more renovations and new construction — such as these houses in Spring Estates in Easley — under way in the county.

Rise in permit fees offers Pickens cold comfort

Fourth-quarter revenues up from '08, but below previous years

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The fourth quarter of last year brought chilly weather, but the possibility of an economic thaw from a slight increase in the amount of building-permit fees collected by Pickens County.

County administrator Chappell Hurst told County Council members during their final meeting of the year that building-permit fees, which through the first three quarters of 2009 had lagged behind numbers from the past several years, had jumped ahead of the fourth-quarter 2008 numbers.

The good news came with caveats, however; most notably that 2008's numbers were far off the pace from 2006's and 2007's — the scope of the comparison Hurst presented.

The fees collected represent permits issued for all construction-related projects in the county, Hurst said, including commercial and residential construction, remodeling and renovations.

"October, November, December, there has been a definite turnaround in our building-permit activity," Hurst said.

"There does appear to be some improvement in our building activity. The number of permits has not picked up as we would like to see, but there is some improvement," he said.

According to Robert Wilbanks, the county's interim building official, the most dramatic turnaround came during the month of October, when, from 2008 to 2009 permit-fee revenues almost doubled, from $18,696 to $34,717. That reversal came after nine months of permit fees being down in 2009 versus 2008, according to information provided to council.

The primary catalyst driving the numbers has been commercial construction, Hurst said.

"Housing is still depressed — we're not permitting the additional housing developments, so we don't see that turning around yet," he explained.

Council Chairman G. Neil Smith noted that even though the trend indicates improvement, permit-fee collections are still down significantly from 2007, when collections hit $60,994 for October.

"You're comparing it to the worst year we've ever had," Smith said.

"We're actually better than the last quarter of last year, but we're substantially down from 2006 and 2007," he said. "This is still ugly."