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Surge in new homes misses Oconee, Pickens

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This file photo shows new home construction in Oconee County earlier this year. The Upstate is lagging behind national construction figures reported this week.

WALHALLA — There was some head scratching by economists looking at the upbeat new residential construction numbers released this week by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

On the national level, both the number of building permits authorized and the number of housing starts in November outpaced October's performance by higher percentages than was expected by the experts.

The rebound in home construction in November, coupled with the surge in new building permits, is an indicator of future economic activity. Most everyone agrees that a healthy housing industry is critical to the overall economy.

However, the positive numbers are not making their way to Oconee and Pickens counties where construction activity continues to falter.

For instance, the combined number of commercial, residential and mobile home building permits issued last month in Oconee was 40. That's almost 50 percent less than the 79 permits issued in October.

Local builder Tom Markovich, president of the Oconee County Home Builders Association, said on Thursday he's stayed busy doing remodeling work, but not on new construction.

"There's still stuff going on, but nowhere near the pace of two years ago," he said.

Markovich said he recently saw an economic report for South Carolina from the University of South Carolina showing economic activity picking up in areas such as Charleston, Columbia and Greenville. He said job growth is helping out those areas, while spots such as Oconee and Pickens remain vulnerable.

"Job creation is key," Markovich said. "It is critical."

Commercial, residential and mobile home building permits in Pickens County totaled 110 in November, or 2.3 percent more than the 107 permits issued in October.

Pickens County Building Official Paul Masterson said the permit numbers today don't represent what they did a few years ago.

"If we had 80 or 100 permits they represented new starts," Masterson said. "Today, the same permits represent adding a new bathroom, adding a garage or remodeling. That skews the numbers as far as new starts."

Nationally, the federal government reported 584,000 permits authorized in November, or 6 percent more than the 551,000 permits cleared in October. The government also reported that 574,000 housing starts were cranked out last month, or 8.9 percent more than the 527,000 housing starts in October.

Pickens County Administrator Chap Hurst said the economic situation has not improved locally.

"It's been down compared to last year," Hurst said. "We've been down across the board."