

Real Estate & Homes Classifieds

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Special to the Packet and Gazette
New home starts are looking lively in neighborhoods north and south of the Broad River. Shown here is one of the newly constructed Cottage Homes in Hampton Lake.

On our way up

Reports show new home starts on the rise in Beaufort County

By **STACEY STUDLEY COLLINS**
Special to the Packet and Gazette

In contrast to ailing real estate markets in many other parts of the country, several local communities are seeing new housing starts begin to rebound. One neighborhood where hammers are ringing is private golf community Colleton River Plantation, in greater Bluffton. According to Colleton River's architectural review board, 11 new homes with a total value of about \$22 million are now under construction. First-quarter figures for housing starts at Colleton River outstripped last year's total.

"We are very pleased to see these 'dream homes' coming to life," said Scott Jaccard, general manager and chief operating officer at Colleton River Plantation Club.

Ashley Feaster, executive officer for the Hilton Head Area Home Builders Association said she's hearing the association's builder and affiliate members relate similar news about other neighborhoods.

"Starting in January, we began to see lots moving again and our member builders are seeing existing clients moving forward with plans to build," she said.

Officials at Hampton Lake, Bluffton's award-winning lakefront community, reported strong real estate sales through the first four months of 2010. Gerrit Albert, president of the 900-acre community, said the spring sales surge "exceeded our predictions."

Just north of the Broad River, Bob Turner, president of Habersham Companies, said first quarter figures in the neo traditional community eclipsed last year's growth.

"The upward trend began last year, but it appears to be gaining momentum," Turner said. "We are already at 100 percent of last year's numbers, and with the approvals in the pipeline, we expect to see that growth continue throughout the year."

Turner anticipates that as northern and Midwestern real estate markets begin to recover, this trend will really take off as people become able to sell their homes in these areas and move south.

THE DRIVE

What is driving new construction? Lower labor costs and land values, and a stabilizing economy, say industry experts.

Rhett Jeffcoat, principal of luxury homebuilder Randy Jeffcoat Builders, said that lower building costs and competitive land values are playing a role in the uptick of new construction. He added that growing confidence as property owners begin to believe the market has turned a corner is a major motivating factor for starting new construction.

"With signs the economy is growing, we are seeing clients move forward with plans they had put off during the economic downturn," Jeffcoat said. "Nearly 75 percent of the homes we're working on now had previously been placed on hold pending improved economic conditions."

Bob Turner said that confidence also is returning in Habersham, now that owners' other investments are recovering.

"Many have also restructured their assets or sold other properties and that is freeing up the capital they need to



STACEY STUDLEY COLLINS • Special to the Packet and Gazette
Matt Black works on a 4,700 square-foot waterfront home in Colleton River in greater Bluffton.

build," Turner said.

AVAILABLE CREDIT

The ability to obtain attractive financing has been a constraint in the luxury home market, industry experts say.

Local custom homebuilders have seen many projects postponed due to the difficulty in obtaining credit.

"Many of our clients are paying cash or securing very modest loans until the lending situation improves," Jeffcoat said.

BACK ON OUR GAME

Unlike Florida and many other states, South Carolina's new home construction is steadily recovering, according to MSNBC's Adversity Index, which shows statewide housing starts up 44.86 percent compared to 2009.

To see the full report, go to http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/29976394/ns/us_news-the_elkhart_project

Until credit is more readily available, communities including Colleton River Plantation and Habersham (where guidelines set certain building time limitations for lot owners) are working with property owners, granting extensions as needed.

MORE EFFICIENT HOMES

Throughout the U.S. and Beaufort County, homeowners are increasingly interested in building energy-conscious, low-maintenance, moderately sized homes, without sacrificing amenities or quality. Even private club communities such as Colleton River Plantation, where homes often exceed 6,000 square feet, have noted that members are carefully considering proportion and scale in the design process.

Reducing unnecessary space is one way homebuilders are improving efficiency. Other ways to improve efficiency include state-of-the-art appliances and energy saving heating and air-conditioning systems.

At the forefront of developing homes in the mid-tier market to meet this need is Hampton Lake, with the community's new LifeSmart Series.

Habersham also has seen demand for smaller homes that are big on charm and creative use of space outstripping that of larger properties.

"People are saying 'we just don't need all that extra space for the way we really live,'" Turner said.