

## **Building activity up in Camden, Currituck**

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CAMDEN — The construction industry in Camden and Currituck appears to be slowly thawing after the lingering chill of the housing market crash almost five years ago.

Both counties are processing more permits this year for subdivisions than in previous years.

In addition, residential building permits are up with modest gains after years of sluggish activity.

Building permits in Currituck appear to be the strongest indicator that construction is picking up.

This year, the county has approved 147 residential building permits, a higher number than any other year going back to 2009. With three months still left in the year, the number could go higher.

In 2011, the end-of-year total was 128 permits and in 2010, it was 136.

In Camden, numbers are up slightly.

Until recently, the county has averaged about one residential permit per month, said Camden Planning Director Dan Porter. Now, he's seeing two, sometimes three a month.

Perhaps more dramatic is the prospect for new subdivisions.

Until recently, Camden Plantation near the Virginia line off U.S. Highway 17 had been the only new project seeking county approval in several years. Plans for the 600-acre mixed housing development were approved in 2011. Developer David Rudiger had plans to sell his first house in 2014, but he was not available Friday to say if plans are on schedule.

Now, some more modest proposals are making their way through Camden's permit approval process.

Developer Woody Perry with Seaboard Development Alliance said the time appears ripe to begin building. Camden commissioners recently approved Seaboard's sketch plan for North River Crossing, an 88-lot subdivision in Indiantown at Trotman and Ditchbank roads.

"We feel there's going to be a need...as the market starts to improve," said Perry.

Perry said the county's construction standstill has left a need for houses priced between \$200,000 to \$250,000. Even during the economic downturn, houses in that price range kept their value, he said. Higher-priced housing did not fare as well.

"Basically, we feel there is a shortage of quality affordable housing." said Perry.

Some smaller construction projects are also being proposed in Camden.

Three subdivisions of 23 lots or less, either approved or seeking approval, include Shipyard Landing, west of U.S. Highway 343 North; Lakes at Shiloh on the south end of Sandy Hook Road; and Deerfield Manor off Horseshoe Road.

In addition, a couple of four-lot subdivisions are seeking county approval. Porter said developers will sometimes start with smaller plans before launching into a more ambitious project.

“It’s a way to generate some cash. so they can move forward and kind of test the waters,” said Porter.

In Currituck, proposals for subdivisions have picked up dramatically since 2010 when permit activity was basically dead.

This year so far, developers have submitted 16 permit applications and four rezoning requests for projects of various sizes. In 2010, there were four.

“We are seeing more activity, but I can’t honestly say why,” said Currituck planner Donna Voliva.

The county’s recent adoption of its new Unified Development Ordinance may have prompted some developers to renew permits before new rules kick in on Jan. 1, she noted. In addition, state legislation that extended the expiration dates of permits during the economic downturn could also play into the uptick in permit activity. Extensions are now expiring, and some developers are renewing their permits to keep approvals on the books.

Even with those possibilities, the number of projects under construction appears to point toward an improving housing market.

For example Laurel Woods Estates, near Currituck’s Historic Courthouse, was first proposed in 2009, along with three other subdivisions, each proposing 150 lots or more. So far, only Laurel Woods Estates has actually sent in the bulldozers.

Construction on the 160-lot subdivision began in August. In the past four months, 16 houses have sold, and developer Sam Miller said he doesn’t expect a slow down in the four-phase project.

“We waited for the right time, and it appears we have come at the right time,” said Miller.

Miller said providing a good quality product in a good location has contributed to the project’s success. Another key ingredient is new financing options for home-buyers, he said. One option for first-time buyers doesn’t require a big down payment, he noted.

Some existing subdivisions, particularly in Moyock, also appear to be gaining momentum.

Creekside Estates, Cypress Landing and Shingle Landing, all have sought approval for developing additional phases to the existing subdivisions.

On the Outer Banks, additional phases are also proposed for Villas at Corolla Bay and Pine Island Reserves

The big difference in the past couple years has been the number of projects reaching final approval, said Voliva. Some projects have been plans on paper for years, but final approval gives the go-ahead for actual construction. In the past two years, 18 projects have reached the final plat stage, compared to two in 2009 and one in 2010.

Developers who have already taken the plunge, say the real test will be when the “for sale” signs go up.

“We’ll let the market take us as quickly or as slowly as it will,” said Perry.