

Single-family housing construction on the rise

Jodie Jackson Jr. | Posted: Saturday, April 12, 2014 2:00 am

Just like the city of Columbia, Boone County is seeing an increase in residential building permits as Mid-Missouri construction activity begins to bounce back from the yearslong recession.

“The numbers look good,” said Stan Shawver, director of the Boone County Resource Management Department, during a recent work session with the Boone County Commission. He said the number of permits for single-family detached homes in the county — outside of the city of Columbia — for the first three months of 2014 is the highest total since 2007, about 10 months before the recession stalled new construction.

Although no one is predicting a return to pre-recession construction activity — the number of county-issued permits for single-family detached homes peaked at 379 in 2004 — the numbers are on pace to continue the growth in new home construction since a low of 124 permits in 2008.

The county’s final tally of single-family home permits for 2013 was 197, the most since 233 permits were issued in 2006. The bulk of those permits — 42 — was issued for residential construction in the Ashland area. Twenty-five permits were for homes just west of Columbia, 21 were for homes in the Centralia area, 20 were for homes in and around Hallsville, and the rest were spread around the county.

“It’s definitely coming back,” said John Page, who has seen the ebbs and flows of local construction for 33 years as the owner of J-Bar Construction. His crew this week began framing a new home at Nursery Road and Eagle View Drive off Route K south of Columbia. “But is it coming back as fast as we wanted it to? Definitely not.”

The Settler’s Ridge subdivision off Route HH north of Columbia also is seeing more activity. Kas Carlson of C&C Construction has three houses under construction, with six more ready to start. The subdivision, which was riding the wave of new home starts in 2005, was among numerous developments that slowed during the economy’s free-fall two years later.

Carlson said the subdivision has 25 homes, and 45 lots remain undeveloped.

Page said the recession made it necessary for several builders to change their business models to include more remodeling work. But he’s glad to see the new home construction market coming back.

“All things considered, it’s going pretty good,” he said. “It looks like it’s going to continue.”

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As residential construction activity picks up, builders are facing updated building codes in the city and county.

The city in September voted to adopt the 2012 edition of the International Building Code, and the county adopted the same code update April 1. The main difference was that the city adopted updated energy efficiency rules, whereas the county did not.

The Columbia City Council’s adoption of the new energy efficiency rules rankled developers and went against the recommendations of the city’s Building Construction Codes Commission and the Environment and Energy Commission, both of which recommended against adopting the new energy efficiency rules in their entirety.

Don Stamper, director of the Central Missouri Development Council, said the city erred in not listening to the experts on its Building Construction Codes Commission, which recommended keeping the city’s residential energy efficiency standards at 2009 levels.

“The county process was much better — much more thorough — and took a much better look at things,” Stamper said. “The county worked hand in hand with the development community and stakeholders. The city blindly adopted” the new energy efficiency rules “without having any understanding of the impact.”

The impact, builders say, is an increase in the cost of homes — something that will be passed on to buyers. However, even before the city and county adopted updated building codes, the cost of new construction was going up in the county.

The county’s data show that while the size of new homes decreased by an average of 1,000 square feet from 2002 to 2011, the price per square foot increased. The average square footage of a new home in Boone County in 2002 was 3,160, and the average cost was \$129,735 for a cost per square foot of \$41.06. Last year, the average square footage was 2,192, and the average cost was \$221,671 for a cost per square foot of \$96.55.

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Boone County adopted its first building codes in 1985 and reviews or updates the codes on a regular cycle. All applications for building permits are reviewed for compliance with land use regulations, floodplain regulations and address requirements. Inspections take place throughout the construction process, and structures don’t receive an occupancy permit until final inspection and approval.

Shawver said any new aspect of construction requires a good look from regulators. For instance, he said, 15 years ago instant hot water heaters were not common, but the proliferation of those units increased insulation requirements.

Another example of how changes in construction require attention from inspectors is the shift from laminate countertops to granite. “That’s not building code,” he said. “That’s consumer-driven.”

But a granite countertop could conceivably affect the load limits of a structure, so that’s where building inspectors come in to ensure safety and structural integrity.

“Everything has an impact,” Shawver said. “People are paying more, yes. But people have higher expectations of what they get.”

Shawver said the county’s code mirrors national and international standards, with some exceptions, and the codes should give buyers, renters and homeowners “a level of comfort that you’re safe and secure.”

The county has contracts to conduct building inspections for all of the smaller municipalities with the exception of Huntsdale and McBaine.

Another example of how the county modified the international and national codes is the decision not to require fire-suppressing sprinkler systems in residential structures. The International Building Code includes that rule.

The county held public hearings on the revised building codes Feb. 25 and 27 and March 6. No one spoke in opposition to the new code, although some sought clarification of some issues.

Although builders generally are more satisfied with the county’s code review and adoption process, there are still areas of debate with the overall development requirements. For instance, Page said the county’s stormwater and stream buffer ordinances — both barely three years old — have not proved to be as restrictive as he first expected, but application and enforcement of the regulations have to be “blended to make it work in your area.”

“It hasn’t been that bad,” Page said.

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Meanwhile, the county’s review and finalization of updated subdivision regulations has resumed, Shawver told county commissioners recently.

“We’re trying to find common ground” with builders and developers, he said.

The current subdivision regulations have been in effect since 1995, and they govern myriad aspects of development, including rules on private roads. The existing regulations allow for private roads, but commissioners have so far insisted that private roads be prohibited in the future — a measure that has rankled more than a few developers.

Boone County processed 32 subdivision plats last year, 23 in 2012 and 21 in 2011. The largest plat had six lots. Shawver said the county requires that all infrastructure be installed before lots can be sold.

“This tends to mean more upfront investment by a developer,” he said.

Although the public might think of a subdivision as a large development with several houses, Shawver said a subdivision can be as small as one lot in the case of a property owner who wants to sell a smaller portion of a larger acreage. In that case, the property is subdivided because it already has road frontage and the required infrastructure.

Any increase in costs, builders say, gets passed along to the consumer.

Carlson of C&C Construction said increased costs could be especially burdensome to buyers who barely qualify for a home loan in the first place.

“It just seems like every time you turn around, there’s something else there that drives the price of the house up,” he said.

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