

2009 slump in house permits points to 'a tough recovery'

By: Dave Moran, Record-Journal staff



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WALLINGFORD - The town saw a marked drop in home building in 2009, both in the number of building lots approved and the number of building permits taken out, which officials and builders both said could translate into a sluggish home construction market well into next year.

The Planning and Zoning Commission approved no permits for new subdivision building lots last year, while the Building Department issued just 15 permits for lots already approved for

Town Planner Linda Bush, who has kept track of such statistics and compiles them into an annual report, said both figures fall far below normal. Dating back to 1992, the town has never approved fewer than a dozen subdivision lots, and some years that number has exceeded 100.

Meriden, Cheshire and Southington reported similarly sluggish building statistics. "That means your tax base is not increasing," Bush said Thursday. "It's my understanding that it's very, very, very difficult to get a mortgage, and home prices are down so people are having difficulty selling their homes and buying a new one because they don't have enough equity."

James Fitzsimmons, chairman of the PZC, said that although last year's building statistics are dire enough in themselves, they could signal an even worse 2010.

"The concern with the 2009 numbers are that 2009 approvals usually mean you see development in 2010, so by having zero approvals in the housing lots in 2009, we're not going to be seeing much building happening in 2010," he said. "I know the timeline of a project from when it gets to PZC to when it gets to opening, and it's a long time - about 12 to 18 months ... I can tell you that we're going to be seeing a tough recovery."

But there were several bright spots in residential development in 2009.

The PZC did approve three condominium developments, with developer David Woronick gaining approval for two separate town house-style developments along Quinnipiac Street, totaling 26 units, while the Ahearn family took advantage of a zoning amendment to the Tracy section of town to begin a 20-unit development on Old Colony Road.

Work also began on the long-delayed Simpson Village condominiums on Center Street, an age-restricted community that will have 28-units when completed and has been in the works since 2005.

New homes also seem to be selling at the Willows, a mid- to high-priced subdivision off North Farms Road that is a collaboration between local developers Liz Verna of Verna Properties and Robert Wiedenmann of Sunwood Development Corp.

Houses in the 65-lot development, which can be built to buyers specifications, range from \$379,000 to \$519,000, and Verna said that more than 20 have been built and sold since the project gained approval in 2007.

Verna said she thinks the development has proven successful in a tough market for a number of reasons: Wallingford is a desirable community, the development is not a condominium or restricted to a certain age group and the houses can be built quickly and at a competitive price.

"We're able to offer new at the price of resell, and our building time is 100 days," she said.

Barry Rosa, vice-president of the Home Builders Association of Connecticut and an executive at Prudential Connecticut Realty,

said that 2009 was a "mixed bag" in terms of housing statistics. He noted that home sales in six of the state's eight counties actually increased in 2009 over the previous year for the first time in more than 20 years, but that building permit approvals saw a noticeable drop-off, down to about 3,150 for the entire state, when the number is traditionally in the 8,000 range.

"There's a trickle effect, definitely, with what's going on in the economy, but what's really going on here is we are not adding new inventory to the marketplace," Rosa said. "That's a really low level of permits, and what it suggests is that at some point in the future - and I don't think it's going to be too long from now - folks are going to be looking for new homes or condos and they're not going to be out there."

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