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OBSERVER IN DEPTH

Charlotte's growth is rampant, like it or not

109,000 new homes possible; boom increases jobs, land values, headaches

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It's easy to find workers clearing oak trees, carving lots out of red clay and building houses in the Charlotte region.

But just how many new homes are coming, and what does that mean to people who already live here?

If subdivision approvals stopped today, an estimated 109,000 new homes still could be built in Mecklenburg and nearby counties, based on an Observer review of planned residential lots.

Despite moratoriums, development fees and other growth-control efforts, enough single-family homes have been approved to house more than 281,000 people -- equal to 15 percent of the region's population.

In large subdivisions, houses will arrive in stages over several years. A few may never hold homes due to revised plans or a lack of money.

Without question, though, tens of thousands of houses are coming. Any count of "homes in the pipeline," in fact, is a moving target. Just Monday, almost 1,000 single-family homes won approval in Lincoln County.

New homes can bring jobs and make land more valuable, increasing the local property tax base. They also can increase the burden on already strained roads, schools and public utilities.

Some home buyers will be newcomers to the region, where the nine-county population has grown by 42 percent since 1990. Others will be locals crossing county lines.

They'll have plenty of choices in each county.

"We truly are seeing something that's pretty remarkable here," said Jeff Michael, director of the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute. "Even if you come from the perspective that growth is good, unmanaged growth can be a problem."

The Homeowner

"It seems like we're getting hemmed in. ... We're building houses, and we're not making the roads ready to move people. ... When we moved here, it was a semi-rural area."

Vance Furr, Eastern Gaston County

The Developer

"I understand that the infrastructure required for this growth is taxing local government, but I don't think it's fair to put that burden on the developer and homebuilder." *Phil Gandy, Gandy Communities*

The Environmentalist

"I was just walking home, and there was this person taking out this tree. ... It was just a wonderful big tree, but I guess they didn't want it. We're losing all of our natural areas. "

Cynthia Jones, volunteer Lakekeeper

Home demand adds to challenges

The forces behind Charlotte's growth are not exactly secret and complex: Land and houses are affordable, the weather is nice, jobs are plentiful.

People move here from elsewhere, looking for a piece of that good life. People already here buy a new house for a better neighborhood or job or school, or because they can make a lot of money by selling their existing home.

But the flood of new homes isn't just about Charlotte anymore. Adjacent counties often have cheaper land and lower taxes than Mecklenburg. Those counties, while hungry to share in Charlotte's boom, now have so many new homes coming that controversies erupt over how best to allow growth and pay for needed improvements for schools, roads and other public services.

"When you look at the population growth ... there has to be housing for those folks," said Jeff Michael, director of the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute, which does research for and provides planning services to local governments. "Obviously, the builders wouldn't build them if the demand wasn't there."

The nine-county Charlotte area grew by 29 percent from 1990 to 2000; only five U.S. metro areas of 1 million or more had a higher rate. The area grew an additional 10 percent from 2000 to 2004, and now has almost 2 million people, according to U.S. Census data.

Such growth is why one developer said the region needs even more lots.

Some areas -- south Mecklenburg, Union County and Cabarrus County -- have less than a year's worth of lots ready for home construction, said Joe Polite, president of the Home Builders Association of Charlotte. The group represents builders, contractors, vendors and others in the industry.

"We're at a low (supply)," Polite said, adding that demand is clearly strong. "People are moving here, and our families are staying here."

Such demand has consequences for people trying to protect natural areas.

Founded in 1991, the Charlotte-based Catawba Lands Conservancy has protected about 6,300 acres in Mecklenburg and nearby counties through land donations and easements, director Dave Cable said.

An additional 1,200 acres could be protected soon, Cable said, but the conservancy's efforts are challenged by residential growth. As property values increase, he said, some landowners can't resist the potential profit from selling to developers.

"The irony," he said, "is that there's never been a greater need for conservation that brings some balance to that rapid rate of development."

Job base expands

Another reason for the breadth of homes planned across the region is that the Charlotte job base has spread beyond the city's center, Michael said. In the 1980s and '90s, many counties and towns wanted better links to the Queen City so residents could easily get uptown, he said. Then came interstate improvements, and the construction of Interstate 485.

"Now there are employment centers popping up along the outerbelt itself," Michael said.

Today, surrounding counties work with state transportation officials to relieve road congestion, said Bill Duston, planning director for the Centralina Council of Governments. Centralina advises Charlotte-area communities on planning and provides training in land use, zoning and other issues.

Whether it's N.C. 16 in eastern Lincoln County or U.S. 74 in western Union County, drivers face almost daily traffic jams on formerly rural highways, Duston said. As they pass schools, he said, they see more temporary classrooms, installed to handle booming enrollments.

The cost of school construction has many county and city managers asking whether residential development takes more from local budgets than it gives.

"There's many a manager who has told me, 'Ain't no way it pays for itself,'" Duston said.

Polite disagreed, and said the homebuilding industry employs more than 30,000 people in the region -- activity that communities in the northeastern U.S. would love to have.

Besides, Polite said, it's not the houses that strain services, but people who choose to buy them.

"Our industry responds to a demand," Polite said. "We don't create a demand."

More houses also have brought more cries for help from local officials.

At UNC Charlotte, the Urban Institute's Land Use and Environmental Planning division didn't exist 10 years ago. Now it regularly hears from local planners seeking guidance on managing growth, he said.

"You name it in the region," Michael said, "and I've probably gotten a call.

"We're seeing such a rapid rate of growth," he added, "that people are struggling with what it all means."

Polite said there's a simple reason so many new homes are on the horizon.

"It's just the organic growth of a healthy community," he said. "As soon as they quit coming here, as soon they stop buying, I guarantee we'll stop developing the lots."

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What this means to ...

The Letter Carrier

"I started in 1979. ... Back then, I would leave the post office and have a tray-and-a-half of mail. Now I've got six trays, and each tray is 2-feet high. ...

"When I first came to Carmel, there was nothing on Highway 51. ... Where Providence High School is, that was all country. It was just a two-lane highway. There was nothing there. Now you go down there and see all the houses and businesses and apartments. ...

"Everything's on top of each other. You can pass the sugar across the window to your neighbor. It's really changed."

Campanella Walker, letter carrier at Carmel Station in south Charlotte

The Superintendent

"A fair amount of time is spent worrying -- worrying about the future, and if we can stay ahead of the growth. ..."I've been in this school district 26 years. I've been here when we had 400 in the high school, and now we have a little over 1,300. ...

"We have people from all over the country. In one of the elementary schools, of 20 students in one classroom, 18 weren't born here."

Bruce Boyles, superintendent of the Mooresville Graded School District

The Road Engineer

"Whenever we try to line a road or resurface a road, we see a lot of traffic. We've got time restrictions for roads now. ...

"Due to the increase in volume in traffic, tempers flare with the traveling public. ...

"In the past, the contractor would get on the road at 7 in the morning and stay until 6 at night. Now he does good to get six hours of work in. Traffic's too heavy during rush hour. ..."

Dennis Cloud, resident engineer in Monroe for the N.C. Department of Transportation's highway division

The Cable Guy

"We try to get them right when they move into their home. ... Our installation people have really been pushed to the wall the last six months or so. ..." "The only problems we have are good problems. They're the challenges of growth -- having the capital to expand, making sure services are installed on time, and having the facilities behind that. ..."

"The area's just booming, and yes, it's good for business."

Glenn McFadden, executive vice president of operations for Comporium Communications in Rock Hill

How Information on Homes Was Compiled

The Observer set out to determine how many single-family homes could be built in the Charlotte region based on residential lots approved for such homes but still vacant.

Reporters interviewed city and county planners and managers in nine counties. No central regional office keeps track of approved lots for new homes.

Most data were collected in the past five months. In some areas, planners compared the approved subdivision lots with homes built to date. In other cases, the Observer calculated the number of potential homes using data from counties.

In Mecklenburg County, some municipalities couldn't tell how many vacant lots remain in subdivisions. Mecklenburg's total is based on data from the county's GIS mapping office.

The estimated regional total is 109,000 at a minimum. That number may be higher because some data were not available:

- York County figures don't include Clover, York and Tega Cay.
- Lancaster County figures include only the fast-growing northern part of the county.
- Iredell County figures don't include unincorporated areas. *JEFFERSON GEORGE*