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S.C. counties grow, thanks to Charlotte

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The coast is clearing out in South Carolina's housing market, and it's making room for a local boom.

A report released by the S.C. Association of Realtors this month said sales of houses, new and existing, in York, Lancaster and Chester counties grew by 66 percent for the first quarter of 2007 compared with the first quarter in 2006. Sales were up 85 percent in March compared with March 2006.

Much of that growth can be attributed to Charlotte.

"No question it's location," said Jay Rinehart, a Rock Hill Realtor and secretary of the S.C. Association of Realtors.

Rinehart said the area has attracted families who want an acre of land and a lawn with their house.

"I'm amazed at the number of people in Rock Hill who commute (to Charlotte)," he said.

Plus, he said, being located midway between the beach and the mountains helped sales.

"The ability to have choices is huge for our area," Rinehart said.

Unlike the coast, which is seeing declines because of stratospheric home insurance rates, Rinehart expects the Piedmont area to keep growing on the coattails of Charlotte.

"I do not see this ending anytime soon," Rinehart said.

The difference between this boom and the coast's, he said, is that "there was a lot of speculation going on on the coast."

Also, the area has Charlotte, which continues to defy declining national housing trends.

"**Charlotte is one of the fastest-growing areas in the country,**" said Chip Taylor, research associate at Clemson University's Strom Thurmond Institute of Government and Public Affairs. "There was a ripple effect."

Another reason for the boom in the housing market may be a group of people who have historically moved to the coast.

"There's a significant influx of retirees," Taylor said.

Many of those retirees have bought homes at Sun City Carolina Lakes in Lancaster County. Another Sun City may be in the works for Lancaster County, too.

The place where retirees used to flock to, the coast, is in a housing crisis, according to the Realtors association. The association said 20,000 insurance policies for houses near the coast have been dropped since last August and that there have been rate hikes of as much as 100 percent.

Because of that, Charleston had the biggest drop of any S.C. market in the first quarter, with a decline of 21 percent.

That didn't help the state's overall sales either. The first quarter of 2007 saw a 3.2 percent drop in the median home price in the state. The number of sales declined by 6.7 percent.