

Census data show housing surge in Columbus area

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Muscogee County and three adjacent counties saw their housing numbers rise over the last decade, U.S. Census data released last week show.

In Muscogee, which covers the entire city of Columbus, total housing units climbed from 76,182 in the year 2000 to 82,690 as the census information was gathered in 2010, an increase of 8.5 percent.

Across the Chattahoochee River, Russell County experienced a 7.7 percent surge, with total housing units rising from 22,831 to 24,595 over the 10-year period.

“I bet if you tracked Russell, it had the highest growth in the last three to five years. They were stagnant for the first half of the 2000s, but the second half they’ve been where the action is,” said Jack Key, a partner with the Columbus-based real-estate firm Coldwell Banker/Kennon, Parker, Duncan & Key. The company does business in Georgia and Alabama.

Key was primarily referring to the housing buildup that has been occurring in the Fort Mitchell area of southern Russell County since about 2008. Homebuilders from as far as Atlanta set up shop in the rural community, going on a construction frenzy because of the rural community’s proximity to the back entrance to Fort Benning.

The post is projected to add 28,000 soldiers, civilian workers and family members through the Base Realignment and Closure process announced in 2005. The major component of that is bringing the U.S. Army Armor School to Fort Benning and blending it with the Army’s Infantry Center to form the Maneuver Center of Excellence. The move is mandated to be completed by Sept. 15.

“With the recession I would say that every area has slowed in terms of growth except Russell,” Key said. “And Russell is the primary area that has seen the intensity the last three or four years.”

Harris County, Key said, is similar to Russell, except in a reverse manner. The more affluent bedroom county north of Columbus experienced a surge in construction of new homes leading up to the BRAC announcement, but then stalled out dramatically in the second half of the decade, particularly as the severe recession took hold.

The 2010 Census data show Harris with 13,397 total housing units, up 30 percent from 10,288 dwellings in 2000.

Meanwhile, Lee County, which includes the burgeoning city of Smiths Station, just north of Phenix City, experienced a sharp increase in its housing market. It jumped from 50,329 units at the start of the decade to 62,391 by the end of it, up 24 percent.

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“That’s a big number and a little bit surprising,” said Dave Erickson, president of Grayhawk Homes, which is based in Columbus but does some building in Phenix City and has a small presence in Auburn and Opelika, the Lee County seat.

“Auburn is a growth engine just in itself,” he said of the university city. “For the last couple of years they’ve been over-housed. Only the lower-end houses seem to have been selling. But they’re getting back to some degree of balance. Opelika has had a fair bit of growth in scattered areas around there as well.”

Erickson, however, said he was not surprised that Muscogee added 6,500 housing units.

That’s an average of 650 per year, within the historical range of 500 to 700 homes being constructed annually.

The current inventory of more than 82,000 housing units comes with the U.S. Census Bureau on Thursday releasing data showing the population of Columbus grew 2 percent since 2000 to 189,885 residents.

Russell’s population climbed 6 percent to 52,947 people, Harris leaped 35 percent to 32,024 residents, and Lee — now classified as its own metropolitan area — increased 22 percent to 140,247 residents.

The 2010 Census information does not include most of the influx of residents connected to the expansion at Fort Benning. And even with the additional housing, Key said he’s not sure there will be enough “desirable” inventory in the market for homebuyers and renters when the dust settles over the next 18 months.

“I think what’s going to happen is we’ll gobble up inventory and there will be room for some more building in short order,” he said. “But I think proceeding with caution will be the order of the day.”