



MON TUE  
  
 78°/54° 87°/58°

Complete forecast, B8

ON

## injects the Court political storm

Did Trump and Ted Cruz insist they'd deport 10 million immigrants in the United States? The Supreme Court will tread carefully as President Obama's plan to deport many as 5 million takes effect here. **A16**



## ington man two years again's staff

Johnson, now at the Porters Neck, spent two years on the staff of President Ronald Reagan, attending motorcades, press arrivals, parade and photo opportunities.

NESS



## ers struggle markets overflow

Homeowners gear up for planting, those who rely on the commodity markets stand to lose if the price of money from overseas is beyond control. **D1**

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## DEVELOPMENT



# Brunswick bounces back

Compass Pointe is seen from above on Monday, April 11. Compass Pointe has sold 810 lots, with 540 homes built thus far, according to a spokesman. COURTESY PHOTO

Lots of land, an improving economy and a surge of retirees has county's housing market booming again

By Adam Wagner | StarNews Staff

**B**RUNSWICK COUNTY — Fred and Peggy Essl wanted to move from New Jersey to the vacant lot in St. James they had spent a decade searching for when both of their children moved within five minutes of home, scuppering those plans.

"What are we going to do? Move away?" Peggy Essl said, explaining why she and her husband sold the St. James lot.

Then, six months after she retired from teaching, Peggy Essl was diagnosed with breast cancer. After she battled the illness, the couple decided they should move to North Carolina after all.

"Fred and I looked at each other," Peggy Essl said, "and said, 'You know what? We need to go live. We need to go do some of the things we wanted to do in our life that we haven't done, so that's why we chose to come back.'"

When they walked into the Compass Pointe sales office and saw the same agent who



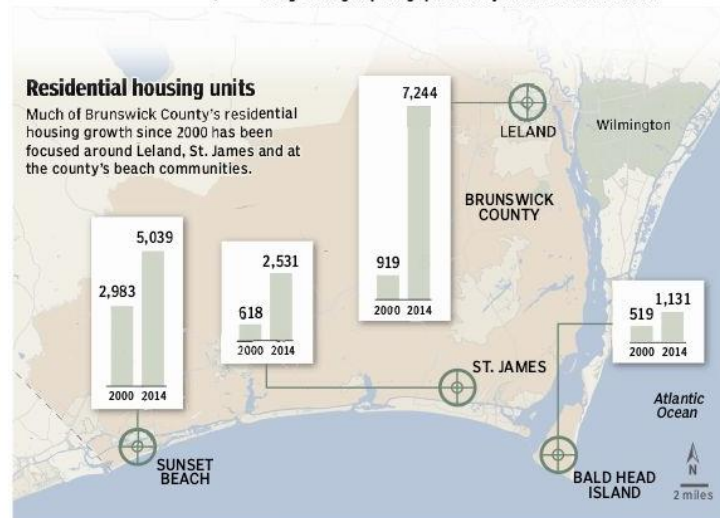
### Coming Monday:

Brunswick County — North Carolina's vacation home mecca.



Bald Head Island has more than doubled its number of residences since 2000, with growth again picking up in recent years. STARNEWS FILE PHOTO

SEE BRUNSWICK, A6



Sources: U.S. Census; maps4news.com/@HERE

GATEHOUSE MEDIA

sold them the St. James lot, the deal was clinched. Since Oct. 27, 2012, the Essls have lived on a site that sits on the eighth green of the Compass Pointe golf course, which is expected to open later this spring.

The Essls are part of the group of retirees boosting homes sales and new construction in Brunswick County to near pre-recession levels, with U.S. Census data indicating much of the growth occurred in the area's coastal towns, in and around Leland and St. James.

When the recession hit Brunswick County hardest, in 2011, for instance, residential construction reached its lowest number of permits issued, with 916, and the total value of new construction, at \$148.1 million. During 2015, those numbers had rebounded to 2,295, the highest number since 2007, and \$516.8 million, the highest total value since 2006.

The availability and affordability of land in Brunswick County are what led developers such as Doky Saffo across the Cape Fear River in the 1970s. Saffo — who was part of a team that started building Olde Towne, Jackey's Creek and Mallory Creek — believes that divide between Brunswick and New Hanover counties has only grown over time.

"Really and truly, Brunswick County is the place to go," said Saffo, whose son, Bill, is Wilmington's mayor.

### 'It worked out pretty well'

Like many developers who purchased large tracts of land in the 1970s, Saffo had to endure his compatriots' open questions about his business sense.

"They told me that I was crazy, that the area had bad schools and that sort of thing," Saffo said. "That I was going to be sitting on these lots for a long time, but it worked out pretty well."

Just outside of Leland on U.S. 74-76 lies Compass Pointe, a 2,200-acre development that has sold 810 lots, building 540 homes, thus far. At any given time, there are at least 40 homes under construction, said Josh Adams, a Compass Pointe spokesman.

Shawn Horton, the owner of Trusst Builder Group, is one of the developer staking advantage of the growth in Brunswick County. In addition to building homes in Compass Pointe, Trusst has done work in Brunswick Forest, Compass Pointe, Hearthstone, Magnolia Greens, St. James, Waterford and Winding River.

Each of those communities, Horton said, has different offerings for people who want to move to Southeastern North Carolina.

In Brunswick Forest, for example, Trusst focuses on townhomes for those who are either retiring to the area with a spouse or coming alone. Compass Pointe — where Trusst builds both townhomes and some single-family houses — focuses on retirees from the Northeast in its advertising, said Adams, the spokesman.

"They just don't need the extra rooms, they don't need the upstairs," Horton said. "They're tired of walking up stairs."

The townhomes usually have one upstairs bedroom, Horton added, so

## BUILDING SURGE

Brunswick County has seen dramatic growth in housing units since 2000, especially in coastal areas and in and around Leland. Figures below show total number of housing units in each municipality.

YEAR	2000	2010	2014
Bald Head Island	599	715	1,131
Belville	142	842	858
Boiling Spring Lakes	1,409	2,516	2,621
Bolivia	77	60	82
Calabash	598	1,568	1,449
Carolina Shores	838	1,712	2,489
Caswell Beach	571	812	727
Holden Beach	2,062	2,389	2,358
Leland	919	5,841	7,244
Navassa	191	798	707
Northwest	293	352	409
Oak Island	6,651	8,317	8,679
Ocean Isle Beach	2,507	2,971	3,312
Sandy Creek	105	167	108
Shalotte	597	1,902	1,849
Southport	1,292	1,795	1,715
St. James	618	2,053	2,531
Sunset Beach	2,983	4,968	5,039
Varnamtown	235	308	292
Unincorporated areas	28,834	37,616	37,816
<b>Total</b>	<b>51,431</b>	<b>77,702</b>	<b>81,416</b>

Source: U.S. Census

## BOOMING BRUNSWICK

Residential construction permits (total value in parentheses)

2003: 1,895 units (\$258,201,000)
2004: 2,418 (\$376,504,000)
2005: 3,268 (\$459,185,000)
2006: 3,905 (\$647,320,000)
2007: 2,841 (\$437,049,000)
2008: 1,722 (\$302,341,000)
2009: 974 (\$198,701,000)
2010: 1,050 (\$185,428,000)
2011: 916 (\$148,116,000)
2012: 1,038 (\$158,981,000)
2013: 1,517 (\$258,757,000)
2014: 1,967 (\$323,939,000)
2015: 2,295 (\$516,789,000)

Source: Brunswick County

that friends or relatives can stay. Typically, Trusst's town homes are between 2,000 and 2,100 square feet.

"They're downsizing without having to downgrade," Horton said.

When Trusst builds single-family standalone homes, they average about 2,700 square feet, Horton added.

In recent years, the developments Trusst is building in have shifted slightly. During 2015, Horton said, Trusst sold more homes in Compass Pointe than in Brunswick Forest for the first time.

Magnolia Greens and Waterford offer similar homes as Brunswick Forest or Compass Pointe, Horton added, but at slightly lower prices.

"The same house is worth more money in Brunswick Forest and Compass Pointe," he said. "There is value in those communities right now, but a lot of these buyers don't buy on future value, they buy on cost."

### Will the boom continue?

There is a strong belief locally that the rise in building, sales and prices is not a fluke, but a sign of sustained growth.

Horton, the builder, is confident that Brunswick will continue to be an attractive location for buyers and builders. Key to that belief is the fact that many of the people buying homes in Brunswick County are retirees migrating from the north.

"People still retire every day," Horton said. "Neighborhoods and communities with walkability and amenities and areas like that (are popular) and we've certainly got that here."

A wall showing recent sales in Compass Pointe's office is indicative of that popularity, with buyers typically coming from New Jersey, New York or Virginia — a result of the

**"The same house is worth more money in Brunswick Forest and Compass Pointe. There is value in those communities right now, but a lot of these buyers don't buy on future value, they buy on cost."**

—Shawn Horton, owner of Trusst Builder Group

development's targeted sales approach.

Another development benefiting from retirees' interest in the area is St. James, in the southeastern part of Brunswick County. During 2015, 279 families moved into the gated community, with builders starting work on 196 additional homes, according to a February release.

Building is expected continue, too, with Novant health recently announcing that its medical facility will be the first construction project in a roughly 2,000-acre development near N.C. 211 and Midway Road. Reports have indicated that, when built out, the development will offer up to 2,250 independent-living housing units and 500,000 square feet of commercial and retail space.

On the northern end of the county, Brunswick Forest developer Jeff Earp requesting the rezoning of 22.35 acres bordering U.S. 17 in front of the neighborhood. During a November 2015 town council meeting, Earp said he would like to build 300 apartments on the land.

A factor potentially limiting the county's growth, said Edward Graham, a finance professor at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, is the area's traffic headaches.

"Congestion on the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge continues to concern homeowners, investors and developers," Graham said. "It has people's attention."

Even with the expected completion of improvements to the U.S. 17-74-76 corridor and Interstate 140, any solution to the congestion problems in north Brunswick is likely decades away.

Nevertheless, Graham expects the area to remain a destination for buyers.

"From 30,000 feet, it's just Southeastern North Carolina," he said. "From 15,000 feet, New Hanover County is getting full. From 100,000 feet, North Carolina in general is attractive to retirees and people who are heading south."

—Reporter Adam Wagner can be reached at 910-343-2389 or Adam.Wagner@StarNewsOnline.com.