

## Real Estate, **REAL HOT**

*Lowcountry market is looking good*

Is it a good time to buy real estate in the Lowcountry? Is it a good time to sell? While Beaufort County's recent reassessment shocked some property owners (a 300% jump is a bit startling), both buyers and sellers know that the price tag for Lowcountry, and especially island, property hasn't gone down lately. Yet, based on figures compiled by the local Multiple Listing Service, the number of sales for the first half of 2004 was 30% higher than the same period in 2003 and totaled more than \$900 million, a 32% jump ahead of last year. Obviously, quite a few people thought it was both a good time to buy and sell.

While a share of those record numbers can be chalked up to buying real estate strictly for investment, an ever-increasing number of buyers are making the Lowcountry home.

In this decade of the entrepreneur, there are those able to trade the hour commute from Mystic [CT] to Manhattan for a home office in Wexford. Others are opting to retire early and start a small business in Bluffton. Due to a shaky stock market, low mortgage rates, and much lower taxes (even with the reassessment) than they are used to paying, bus loads of "boomers" are heading South for a "lifestyle change" and creating the real estate boom.

Empirical proof is in the numbers. In 1994, Hilton Head's population was hovering at 26,000. Today, the town estimates there are 36,000 plus, though the island's population actually dropped between 2002 and 2003. Of course, just across the bridge the figures are more staggering. A decade ago, in the one square mile that comprised the town of Bluffton, there were about 800 citizens. In 2000, there were 1,275 residents. With annexation (Bluffton is now 50 square miles), according to the Town of Bluffton Community Development Department, the estimated residential population in 2004 is well more than 4,000. In 2000, there were 299 residences in the town. Today there are 1,328. Bluffton Township (that would include the town of Bluffton and everything south of the Broad River other than Hilton Head) the population exceeds 20,000. In just four years, there has been more than a 200% increase in people calling Bluffton

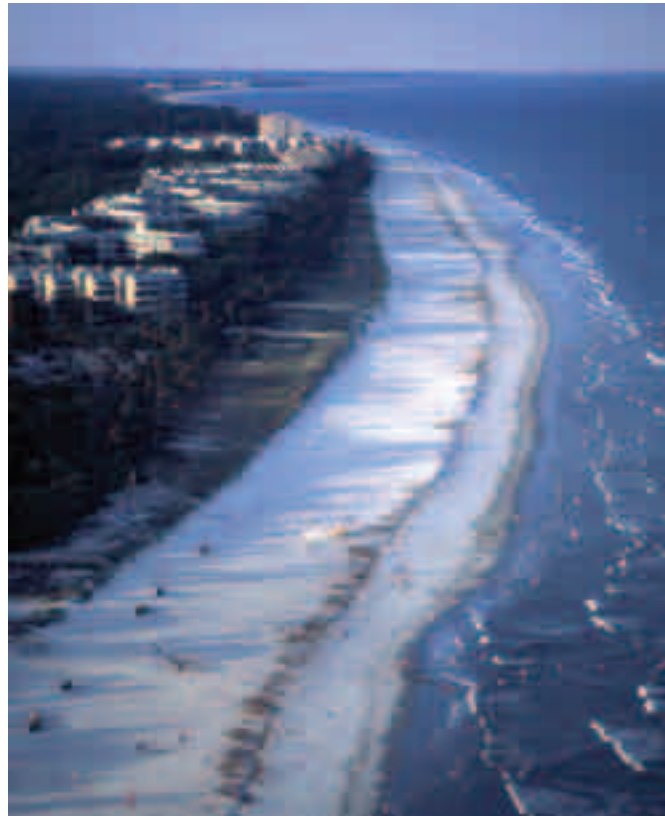


PHOTO BY PATRICK BUNCEY/CRESCENT MOON PICTURES

home. And there is plenty of room for Bluffton to grow. Back on the island, it's a slightly different story.

"It's an island and they're not making any more of it."

That phrase has passed through the lips of real estate agents since the first oceanfront lot was sold in Sea Pines. With an aggressive (and most say "welcome") push by the town of Hilton Head to acquire land (1,108 acres so far), and bold moves by developers to build where few have built before (take a trip down Marshland Road or to Singleton Beach, if you need proof), it seems the agents' admonition is finally coming true. According to Karen Cullen, Senior Planner in Comprehensive Planning for the town, of the approximately 27,000 acres that make up this fair island (42.1 square miles), there remains about 1,000 acres that can be devel-

oped. The latest figures are based on measurements taken in 2003.

"I'm working on new population projections for the town right now. We doing it based on land use, rather than taking some mathematical formula and applying previous trends to it because, we're so far along in our growth, I haven't been able to find any population projection models that really work," Cullen said. The typical models demographers use just don't work. Her result, minus "resort accommodations," is 25,000 "units" at build-out. "Units" covers everything from single-family homes to trailers. Because Hilton Head defies standard demographic models, as Cullen suggests, the island could be close to "build-out" in the next few years.

What will build-out mean for the island's current and future residents? Cullen says that is what comprehensive planning is all about: planning for the future.

Looking at the past for what the future holds, the answer is easy. The scenario goes something like this: A couple cross the bridge to Hilton Head Island. It is their very first visit and image of traffic on U.S. 278 vanishes. The sun sparkles off Calibogue Sound as, in the distance, sail boats gracefully cut through the wind and water. They are enthralled. The decision is almost instant. They want to live here. — Paul deVere