

Durant transitions with growth

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DURANT — McMansions and tony townhouses aren't just for urban dwellers. The housing boom brought haute living to Durant, too.

Not that Durant, population about 15,000, technically in rural Oklahoma, is off the beaten path.

With traffic on U.S. Highway 69/75, a main artery into Dallas, comparable to Interstate 35 north of Guthrie — 22,000 count on the south side of Durant in 2003, the most recent figures available — Durant is on a main drag.

With a boom in retail since the Wal-Mart SuperCenter opened and attracted smaller stores in 2003, with a boom in industry since Big Lots Inc. put a huge distribution center here in 2004, with growing Southeastern State University and the gaming-driven expansion in Choctaw Nation enterprises, Durant has been humming.

And hammering, nailing, framing, hanging, pouring, bricking, shingling and every other thing it takes to build houses.

Custom home builder Bill Trent estimated that Durant has builders active in a dozen subdivisions, including his own gated Camelot Forest, where he and other builders are constructing homes up to 7,000 square feet and more for \$1 million and more.

McMansions are the exception, not the rule. Homes started in Durant this year ranged from a cluster by Barling, Ark.-based ERC Construction's at a little more than \$70,000 for 1,100 square feet to a 3,440-square-foot house for \$280,000, city records show.

The city permitted 33 single-family homes through October, plus a few duplexes, records show. Trent said he thought more houses were being built outside the city than in it. The city issued 68 permits in 2005, 53 in 2004, 66 in 2003 and 70 in 2002.

Plus, two apartment complexes are under way— ParkRidge, a 105-unit complex by ERC, and High Meadows, a 208-unit complex by Zerga Development of McKinney, Texas.

But Trent and condominium developer Mike Herron said the economic growth here the past few years has created demand for upscale homes with all the amenities.

For example, Herron's townhouse project at 3925 N First St. — on State Highway 78 north of the main part of Durant — will have 12 units for lease with great rooms capped by 24-foot ceilings, lofts suitable for an office or bedroom, extra-large attached garages and other amenities. Four wells and a retaining pond will allow Herron to keep the community heavily landscaped.

Herron said his target market is executives in transition — those moving to Durant and needing a place to live while they wait for their own McMansion to be built, perhaps by Trent's All Seasons Construction, which builds some of the largest houses around.

Retirees also continue to be attracted to the Durant area because of recreation at nearby Lake Texoma, said Mike Means, executive vice president of the Oklahoma State Home Builders Association. "And you have a lot of business growth right in Durant. You've got some things happening. You've got a booming community going on. Houses will follow that," he said.

Except for areas of the state with zero population growth and no business expansion at all, most of Oklahoma — urban and rural — got a piece of the housing boom before slackened demand and a bump up in inventory caused most builders to ease up on their plans, Means said.

"I think, overall, it filtered everywhere," he said. "You have an aging house stock. Somebody had to build. And we've had low interest rates for a long time. Plus, we have mineral owners all over the place making money."

Means said the boom is over but the housing market hasn't crashed in Oklahoma — and no one expects it to crash. Homes in the \$300,000-\$600,000 range aren't selling, he said, but those at the entry level and just above, and those at the top end — homes like the ones being built in Durant — are still moving fairly well.