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BUSINESS BAROMETER

## County's Home Sales, House Permits Are Up

By [Kyle Kennedy](#)

The Ledger

LAKELAND -- The onset of the holiday season didn't freeze the local economy's growth in November.

Area home sales exceeded state and national gains, while an impact fee deadline helped drive up building permits, according to The Ledger's monthly Polk Business Barometer.

The county's jobless rate also hit a five-year low.

Polk County's total of 497 existing home sales in November was up 23 percent from 405 in November 2004. During the same period, Florida's existing home sales increased just 1 percent, while national sales fell 1.7 percent.

Despite local sales gains, Polk Realtors weren't entirely immune to the seasonal slowdown. November sales in Lakeland were up just 5 percent from the year prior.

"Right up until November, things were jumping off the market as fast as they came on," said Sylvia Smith, a Realtor with Keller Williams in Lakeland. "November and December are slow for us normally. We're expecting another pickup in January."

Local builders pulled 782 permits for new home construction in November, up nearly 75 percent from the year before. But building officials say that increase was likely influenced by a Nov. 30 deadline to avoid the county's new school impact fee, which jumped from \$1,607 to \$8,596 on Dec. 1.

Also in November, Polk's jobless rate fell to 3.7 percent, a figure last recorded here in May 2000. Some 4,400 jobs were added since November 2004, with the retail sector hiring about 700 employees in advance of holiday shopping.

Revenue from tourism stood at \$10.5 million in November, down 21.7 percent from November 2004. The figures, reported by the Polk County Tax Collector's Office, refer to hotel and vacation home rentals from October.

November 2004's tourism revenue (representing Oct. 2004 sales), \$12.8 million, was unusually high because of a large population of hurricane evacuees staying in the county, said Mark Jackson, Polk's director of tourism and sports marketing.

"What we basically had last year was an anomaly. We had a spike (in revenue), then it leveled off," Jackson said.

Taxable retail sales for September, the most recent month available from the Florida Department of Revenue, came to \$644.2 million. That made for an increase of 13.8 percent from the year prior.

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