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The cost of high living

Downtown condominiums soar in price and popularity

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Downtown condominiums, such as this single-bedroom unit at the Hartman Loft Condominiums at 4th and Main streets, are in such high demand that the units now are pricier per square foot than many homes in suburban areas.

As Downtown enters the fifth year of a home-building push, prices are rising nearly as high as some of the skyscrapers.

Downtown condominium and apartment developers say they have more buyers than units to sell. Price, they say, seems to be less of an issue.

When the first Downtown condos hit the market in 2003, asking prices at Connexions Lofts and Renaissance averaged just less than \$174,000, for an average 1,017 square feet. The most expensive condos, according to the Columbus Downtown Development Center, were priced at \$264,900,

Average asking prices since have nearly doubled, jumping to more than \$301,000. The condos have grown, too, now averaging 1,215 square feet.

The most expensive top \$1 million.

"We don't come off the asking price," said Spectrum Properties President Bill Shelby, who is building his second and third Downtown condo projects.

"At City View on Third, we've bumped (up) the price several times, just because the market demand's there," he said. "I don't know anybody who's struggling at this time to sell."

One day last week, the Columbus Board of Realtors took stock of Downtown listings priced from \$200,000 to \$500,000. They compared them to similarly priced houses in southern Delaware County, the 12th-fastest-growing county in the nation.

Costs per square foot of living space, the real-estate standard for comparing properties, showed how much Downtown prices are rising.

Downtown had just 41 listings, priced at an average of nearly \$237 per square foot. Southern Delaware County had 937 listings, priced at \$128 per square foot.

Lyna Sauer, a ReMax real estate agent in Worthington, said the Delaware County situation is a result of fewer buyers and more houses.

"There's so much 'new build' going on up here that you can probably get it for less," she said.

Outside Downtown, home

prices in central Ohio are lower than they've been since late 2003, according to Board of Realtors statistics.

"We've got a lousy job market, and it's affecting the housing market," said Jim Hilz, executive director of the Building Industry Association of Central Ohio.

As a result, suburban homebuilders are fighting for buyers like never before. This weekend, Centex Homes is offering up to \$50,000 off the price of a house. It's the biggest discount a homebuilder has offered since a host of builders resorted to price cuts in January.

Meanwhile, the limited supply of Downtown condos continues to sell briskly, many before construction is complete.

At Carlyle's Watch on N. 3rd Street, developer Tom Fortin said 38 of 54 condos were sold nine months before construction is expected to be complete. Buyers paid an average \$255,000 for 1,150 square feet. Those results encouraged Fortin to begin plans for a second Downtown project. He hopes to build 10 units priced \$250,000 to \$400,000 along Civic Center Drive.

Throughout Downtown, 500 units were under construction as of March 1, while 578 more are in various stages of development.

Developers say buyers want more expensive countertops,

flooring and cabinetry and don't worry about the bill. Ten-year property-tax abatements just sweeten the pot.

"We've got two empty-nester couples, from New Albany and Dublin," Spectrum's Shelby said. "Both of them told me with what they're saving in taxes, they can pretty much pay their mortgages."

This month, Nationwide Realty Investors began work on the Condominiums at North Bank Park. Nationwide's third Arena District housing project, the 109-unit building, will be the most expensive, spokeswoman Michelle Chippas said.

Prices are expected to start in the mid-\$300,000s and top out at more than \$1 million, although exact prices are not set.

"People are willing to pay a little more in the Arena District to be here," Chippas said.

"People who have lived in the suburbs in nicer homes — when they make the decision to move Downtown, they definitely want the higher end.

"It's a new lifestyle."