

BRIEF
NATION

WASHINGTON

Housing slowdown could hurt rest of economy

The five-year housing boom is showing increased signs of cooling, and that's likely to mean slower growth for the entire national economy. The big question now is whether home prices will come crashing to earth with even more severe consequences. The National Association of Realtors reported Wednesday that sales of existing homes climbed to an all-time high of 7.072 million units in 2005, up 4.2 percent from 2004 and the fifth straight year sales have set a record.

However, in a sign of slowing activity, sales fell by 5.7 percent in December, marking the third straight monthly decline, something that had not occurred since early 2002.

Analysts are forecasting that sales of both existing and new homes will fall this year, perhaps by as much as 10 percent. The economy could be in trouble this year unless other forces take up the slack from a slowdown in housing, they said.

Analysts at Goldman Sachs estimated that the housing slowdown will begin to be a drag on economic growth by midyear and by early 2007 will be trimming growth by around 1.5 percentage points. Other sectors, such as business investment spending and an improving trade performance, are expected to take up the slack.

BRIEF
WORLD

VATICAN CITY

Pope warns against sex without absolute love

Pope Benedict XVI said in his first encyclical Wednesday that the Roman Catholic Church has a duty through its charitable work to influence political leaders to ease suffering and promote justice.

The document, "God is Love," also warns against sex without unconditional love, which he said risked turning men and women into merchandise.

The 71-page document can be seen as an effort by Benedict to stress the fundamental tenet of the Christian faith, love, and assert the church's duty to exercise love through its works of charity in an unjust world.

The text is divided into two parts: Part I explores what Benedict calls the "unity of love," based on the Greek term "eros," the erotic love between man and woman, and "agape," unconditional love.

Part II of the encyclical puts the theological concept of love into concrete terms, which Benedict said is found in the church's charitable activities, where the love of one's neighbor is put into practice.

Militants get strong support in Palestinian vote

The Associated Press

RAMALLAH, West Bank

Hamas made a stronger-than-expected showing in the Palestinians' first parliamentary election in a decade Wednesday, and the ruling Fatah Party may have to include the Islamic militants in a coalition government, according to exit polls.

The impressive results for Hamas, competing in its first election ever, reflected popular discontent with Fatah, the secular party that has led the Palestinian Authority since its creation

12 years ago and has been accused of widespread corruption and mismanagement.

The election was the Palestinians' first truly competitive vote, and officials hoped it would help cement democracy in the post-Yasser Arafat era. But it also gave unprecedented clout to Hamas, which calls for Israel's destruction and is listed as a terror group by the United States and European Union.

An exit poll by Bir Zeit University in Ramallah showed Fatah winning 63 seats in the 132-member parliament with 46.4 percent

of the vote, and Hamas taking 58 seats with 39.5 percent. Smaller parties received 11 seats, according to the poll of 8,000 voters in 232 polling stations. The poll had a one-seat margin of error.

A second survey showed Fatah beating Hamas 42 percent to 35 percent.

Before the election, pollsters said the race was too close to call. Hamas made a stronger showing than the 30 percent that many pollsters expected.

The polls indicated Fatah may need to include some Hamas members in its ruling coalition because

some of the independents were aligned with the militants. Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas could face problems with Israel and the United States if he includes Hamas members in his Cabinet.

President Bush told The Wall Street Journal in an interview Wednesday that the United States will not deal with Hamas until it renounces its position calling for the destruction of Israel.

"A political party, in order to be viable, is one that professes peace, in my judgment, in order that it will keep the peace," Bush said.

Hundreds of thousands of Pales-

tinians flooded polling stations throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip for a vote that would determine how Palestinians wanted to be governed and whether they would pursue negotiations or confrontation with Israel.

Long lines formed at polling stations, and 77.7 percent of 1.3 million eligible voters cast ballots. Under a compromise with Israel, some Arabs in east Jerusalem were allowed to cast absentee ballots at post offices in the disputed city, and voting was extended there by two hours because postal employees were working slowly.



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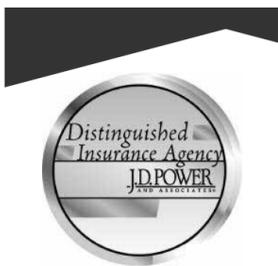
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