Hotel/conference center good idea at bad time, study finds

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WALHALLA — Oconee County could use a 100-bed hotel with conference center — but not in this shaky economy — a consultant hired by the county concluded in the second part of a three-phase study.

Strategic Advisory Group strongly supports the building of a 12,000-square foot conference center and a hotel with approximately 100 beds.

However, the Duluth, Ga.-based consultants that specialize in planning big-venue facilities such as sports stadiums, arenas and convention centers, flatly admit "economic conditions are not conducive" to developing a conference center and hotel in Oconee anytime soon.



Sloan

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Instead of a short-term project, SAG is recommending that Oconee policymakers incorporate plans for a hotel/conference center into their long-range planning.

Tom Reifert, a partner with SAG, said the lodging market is cyclical just as the overall economy. He said the lodging market has shown signs of stabilizing with demand increasing and average daily rates no longer declining.

"The situation of the lodging market in the Mountain Lakes area is not dissimilar to many areas around the country," Reifert said.

Ken Sloan, executive director of the Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau, announced the latest phase of the $30,000 study Thursday.

SAG found in the initial phase of the study that there is a need for hotel rooms in Oconee. Phase II included a detailed survey, analysis and research of similar communities.

The final phase of the study will examine public-private funding scenarios with a focus on the economic viability of the project once the overall market recovers.

Sloan said the final phase should be completed by mid-September and then SAG would present its findings to the Oconee County Council and Oconee Alliance.

Jim Gadd, executive director of the Oconee Alliance, expressed mixed feelings about the Phase II conclusions.

"Although we are somewhat disheartened by the current economic situation, we like the idea of planning for the future and being ready to develop once the economy turns around," Gadd said.

Gadd added that county officials look forward to the completion of Phase III "so we can better understand what a private/public partnership might look like."

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