

Study supports small conference center

Cost/benefit analysis may follow to determine if idea has potential

By Travis Gulbrandson

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While it would not be feasible financially to build a hotel headquarter facility in Vermillion to host events for more than 250 people, there does appear to be support for a smaller conference center.

Those are the findings of a recent study performed by Conventions, Sports & Leisure, a Minneapolis advisory firm.

"The study (showed) that there was a significant need for local banquet, reception and meeting space," said Steve Howe, executive director of the Vermillion Area Chamber & Development Company, which commissioned the study. "It was estimated that we were missing out on about 50 percent of that business. ...

"Single-day events are what we have a strong market for. Multi-day events we just couldn't support," he said.

Paid for with \$25,000 of Vermillion NOW! campaign funds, the study found that Vermillion would be unable to support a larger facility in part because of its location.

This finding was based in part on conversations with

representatives of larger conferences and events.

"Conventions, Sports & Leisure went in and interviewed over 100 of these organizations, and it was identified that they would likely not choose Vermillion due to its location in the state, our close proximity to Sioux Falls and Sioux City, and also out proximity in the southeast corner," Howe said. "It's difficult to get people from Rapid City to come to Sioux Falls, much less an extra-hour trip to come to Vermillion."

Another factor is lack of hotel space, which Howe said currently stands at "about 200 rooms."

"To bring in a conference of 250 people, we just don't have the inventory rooms to support that, and they don't anticipate that a conference center would bring in enough new business to justify a hotel adding rooms," he said.

The type of events the conference center would most likely attract would be larger wedding receptions, banquets, reunions and small commercial shows.

"The actual facility that was recommended was bigger than I originally thought we could support," Howe said. "What

they're talking about is a facility between 18,000 and 26,000 square feet. It sits on a half-acre land with enough parking for 200. That's a fairly sizable facility, and it won't be cheap. It's going to be a significant investment to create a facility of this size."

The building would need a banquet space that would be subdividable for smaller events, as well as breakout rooms, kitchen facilities and ample parking.

"While we didn't do a formal location analysis, they did tell us it needs to be within walking distance of hotels and other amenities," Howe said. "So that plays a lot into where we might locate it. There's only a couple places in town with hotels, so if we want to do it right there's not many places that it could go."

All discussions regarding location are purely speculative at this point, he added.

Another question remains: What actual economic effects would such a facility bring to the community?

"Will it increase room nights? Will it increase restaurant sales? Will it increase sales at Wal-Mart? Will we see an increase of tax revenue as an indirect result of a facility like this?" Howe said.

"That's an important thing, if we're going to ask the public to support something like this, we need to show that there's a benefit to the community."

For this reason, an economic and cost benefit analysis may be performed by Conventions, Sports & Leisure, which would cost \$10,000. Funding – which would come from the Chamber budget – will be approved or rejected based on the type of information the analysis would provide.

The findings of the first study recently were presented to the Chamber board and the city council, and the economic analysis could be done in 60 days, Howe said.

"We intentionally split this into two phases," Howe said. "We didn't want to pay for the economic impact study if the market wasn't there. That would just have been throwing money away. Now that we know that the market is there ... we can do the next step."

Of course, the economic analysis also could be the last step of the process.

"We're prepared also that the answer to these questions might be 'no,' that we're not there," Howe

said. "We're willing to spend the money to find out that answer."

The initial study was undertaken after the Chamber received a number of inquiries regarding an event center of some kind.

"We didn't want to make any decisions based on anecdotal information, so we gathered a group of people together to serve as a taskforce to look at the conference center," Howe said.

The group included such people as hotel managers, caterers and other local businesspeople and officials.

"They met several times and came to the conclusion that, yes, we do need to do a formal study on this. There was a desire by the community for this type of space," Howe said.

More public input is being sought, however, before the decision is made to allocate the funding for the economic and cost benefit analysis.

"We're doing our best to include as many people as possible. We want everybody's opinion," Howe said. "Our goals right now are to get as much feedback as possible in the next 30 days."

Howe will make his final recommendation to the Chamber board about whether to allocate the funding for the analysis this month.

COURTS

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the time, told *The Volante* that the Cypress Courts apartments made a good first home for her and her husband.

In the story, Boyle recommended the apartments for newly married couples.

"For our first year, I think it was really nice, as far as saving money and then being able to be on campus. I think it would be good for when you're first starting to be married, except you don't have too far to run from each other," Boyle said.

Elizabeth Harder, the university's housing

director in 2008, told *The Volante* that the apartments at Cypress Courts were the only designated area on campus for married couples and students with children.

That year, six families with children, 15 married couples and a number of graduate students and international students occupied the 40 apartments at Cypress Court.

Students who are married or have a child are allowed to live off of campus, regardless of age, but some still choose to live on campus at Cypress. Most students in the apartments are newly married and are still close to the traditional college-age students, Harder said, and appreciate the

community feeling of the campus.

"They're also still very connected to a lot of people who are still on campus. So it's kind of like the next step away, but you still have all the convenience of living on campus," Harder told *The Volante*.

The student newspaper's report noted that utilities were included in the rent charge for the one-bedroom apartments, as well as Internet, trash services and cable. The apartments also had private bathrooms and kitchens with a full-sized refrigerator and oven. Cypress Courts' apartments were identical to the dimensions of the apartments at Redwood

Court.

Junior Sean Fitzsimmons and his wife Ramsey, a senior, were new to Cypress Courts in 2008. The couple moved in at the beginning of the fall semester that year and they told *The Volante* they are more than satisfied with their new living accommodations, even if the space is limited.

"We actually like it a lot. There's not really anything to dislike. If I have one complaint, I think it'd be that there is a little bit of lack of space. You have to be clever about where you put your stuff," Ramsey Fitzsimmons said.

Sean Fitzsimmons said the apartment's petite size surprised him.

His wife, however, said she knew from past experiences that the living quarters would be tight.

"My sophomore year, I lived in Redwood Court, so I kind of knew going in what the size would be like and what the kitchen would be like. So, it wasn't a big surprise or anything," Ramsey Fitzsimmons said.

In *The Volante* story, Harder said many couples, generally around ages 21 and 22, choose Cypress because of low prices and less hassle. Rent payments are made monthly rather than by the semester, so students can live in the apartments year-round, Harder said.

"There are no hidden costs because it's also right into your tuition. So there's a convenience factor that really can't be beat. You don't have to worry about parking

coming onto campus and (there is) 24-hour emergency response. They have all the services, so it's really about convenience," Harder said.

Ramsey Fitzsimmons said the low price was the appeal for her and her husband.

"It's just a really good deal. They include your Internet services, your water and your electricity and garbage. It's just a really good rent deal for a one-bedroom apartment," Ramsey said.

Sophomore Mary Hosford told *The Volante* in 2008 that she was satisfied with her apartment at Cypress that she has lived in for the past year-and-a-half with her husband, Charlie. Hosford said she also liked the apartments because they are inexpensive and close to school, so she doesn't have to worry about driving back and forth.

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