

Conference Center 'Details' Lined Up

By PRESTON KNIGHT

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HARRISONBURG — The developer working on details of a proposed \$40 million downtown public-private hotel and conference center could present his plan to City Council in early summer.

Paul Gladd, of dpM Partners in Gaithersburg, Md., said in a phone interview Wednesday that he was finishing work on land acquisition and a feasibility study on the project. Identifying property near Harrisonburg's downtown to build on is one component of the "detail phase" of the project that council in January directed developers to bring back when they're ready.

Gladd would only say that the land is "within walking distance of Main Street."

Several sources say property owned by James Madison University, at the corner of Cantrell Avenue and South Main Street, is an option. The site includes the lower parking lot of the former Rockingham Memorial Hospital Cancer Center.

Bill Wyatt, JMU's public affairs manager, said the school has not received any formal requests from the city or developers for a hotel and conference center at that site or anywhere else on campus.

Gladd could not be reached for additional comment Thursday. Brian Shull, the city's economic development director, said he could not confirm or deny the location.

City Would Pay \$9.5M

City Council seeks additional information, including site location, on the proposal before making any decision.

By authorizing the "detail phase," which includes the feasibility study at dpM's expense, council was not endorsing the project.

DpM approached Harrisonburg officials unsolicited through the Public-Private Education Facilities and Infrastructure Act, which encourages public-private partnerships on projects such as schools and civic centers.

The project, according to a plan submitted last fall, would require \$9.5 million in public funding to go toward the construction of an 18,180 square-foot conference center.

Developers would pay for the rest of the \$39.9 million project, including a 205-room hotel and restaurant.

"Momentum is building. Everybody's very excited," Gladd said. "Every time you do a project like this, you have to make sure very different groups are interested."

The hospitality community in Harrisonburg is one of those, and, despite the developer's optimism, it isn't sold on the idea.

Jenifer Jackson, general manager of the Comfort Inn in Harrisonburg, said public funds should not pay for a private enterprise that will compete with other private owners who invested their own money.

"If the new development fails," she said, "the city will be exposed to a substantial loss."

The Harrisonburg project would be a "hybrid" of dpM's work on the Newport News Marriott at City Center and the Stonewall Jackson Hotel and Conference Center in Staunton, Gladd said.

The Friendly City's proposed hotel would be independent, he added.

Contact Preston Knight at 574 6272 or pknight@dnronline.com.