

High-end lodging planned

Hotelier builds on Washington Road

By Laura Youngs | *Staff Writer*

Saturday, December 09, 2006

Despite a recent dip in hotel occupancy, the city could soon be looking at a handful of high-end hotels and a small convention center just off of Washington Road.

Construction has begun on a \$9 million, 95-room Staybridge Suites extended-stay hotel on Center West Parkway that will be finished by November 2007.

The project is being developed by Augusta hotelier Jugal Purohit, who in September opened a 40,000-square-foot, 65-room Country Inn & Suites on an adjacent parcel.

Mr. Purohit said he also plans to build on his 10 acres a 14,500-square-foot convention center and a \$10 million, 95-room Radisson-branded hotel.

Those projects, if built, would complement his existing cluster of hotels near the busy intersection, including the Best Western Garden City and AmeriHost Inn - the latter of which is being rebranded as a Ramada.

It might seem like a large concentration of hotels, but Mr. Purohit said his more than \$40 million investment will pull hotel customers seeking high-end lodging back from Columbia County and other areas.

"Our goal is to bring all the business back to Washington Road," he said. "It is the main heart of Augusta."

He said work on the \$2.5 million convention center will begin in January. Construction of the Radisson could begin in May and open in March 2008, said Jasmine Shah, the operations manager for Purohit Holding.

The center, which will accommodate up to 550 people, will feature the usual business amenities such as wireless Internet, but will also have a full-service kitchen for catering companies and be available for events such as weddings.

The largest ballroom at the Augusta Marriott Hotel & Suites' convention center can hold 1,200 people.

The 69,000-square-foot Staybridge Suites will feature a bar, pool and wireless Internet. Rooms will start at \$125 a night.

He said while there are many hotels in the area, his investments represent higher-end lodging, which he believes Richmond County doesn't have enough of.

Though Augusta hotel occupancy grew 16 percent in 2005, occupancy this year has dropped 2.1 percent from October 2005 to October 2006, according to figures from Smith Travel Research.

Those numbers are in line with the national rates, said Barry White, the president of the Augusta Convention & Visitors Bureau, pointing to Smith Travel numbers that show national occupancy rates increasing 1.1 percent.

"We're trending right along with what the rest of the nation is doing," Mr. White said.

Augusta room rates were up 5.8 percent, to \$66.19, which Mr. White said indicated that while fewer rooms were sold, they were commanding a higher price.