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## **OU Housing Study: New Apartments Needed to Absorb Enrollment Growth**

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While Athens residents debate the need for new student-apartment projects and additional off-campus housing in the city, an Ohio University study states that several new apartment complexes are needed just to keep up with current enrollment projections.

In fact, the study, which is posted on the OU Web site, states that even if all of the apartment complexes that were being discussed in 2006 were built, the housing situation on campus would still be "strained."

The study, the Off-Campus Capacity Analysis, was completed in the fall of 2006 by the firm of Brailsford and Dunlavey, a facility planning and program-management firm that works with educational institutions across the country and is based in Washington, D.C.

The report states that the local housing market is currently "strained by high demand and limited supply." The report states that students occupy 86 percent of the rentals in Athens.

"If the student body grows to 22,600 by the fall of 2015 (per strategic goals and enrollment projections developed by the university in fall 2005), Athens will be able to absorb the enrollment growth, contingent upon the development of 1,900 apartment beds currently on the books in the Athens' planning department," the report states.

Enrollment is currently at 20,225 on the Athens campus, according to a recent article on OU's Outlook Web site. The fall enrollment is up by 80 students over fall of 2006, according to the article. OU officials say the enrollment projections still apply, as the university hopes to increase enrollment on the Athens campus to 22,600 by 2015.

The Off-Campus Capacity Analysis reports that while the addition of 1,900 new apartment beds would allow the city to accept the projected growth in enrollment, the housing market would still be very tight.

"When I look at their numbers, it's pretty striking," Athens Mayor Ric Abel said.

Abel, who will leave office at year's end, has referenced the OU study several times in the last year while discussing the apparent need for more student housing to keep up with rising enrollment.

Abel added that the university has previously discussed allowing sophomores to live off-campus if they ran out of residence hall space. This move would further tighten the local rental market, he said.

Taking steps such as increasing the retention rates and increasing the number of graduate students would also result in adding more students who are most likely above the freshman/sophomore level and may be living off campus, Abel said.

The Off-Campus Capacity Analysis suggests several steps for keeping up with the rising enrollment, including expanding and renovating the residence-hall system, developing new zoning requirements that would increase residential density and improve student-housing conditions along developed corridors in Athens, create a "campus edge" along the north and south areas of campus through the development of apartments and mixed-use buildings, and promoting greater student occupancy and student-life activities within the campus edge areas.

THE ADDITIONAL HOUSING discussed in the study includes all of the housing projects that had information on file with the city last year. They would include the Summit at Coates Run complex with 700 beds, the Copper Beach apartment complex with 500 beds, the Mill Street Apartments with 200 beds, and the Landmark/Palmer Place apartments with 500 beds.

One year after the study was completed, the Palmer Place project is being built, the Mill Street Apartments are open, and the Summit at Coates Run project is still being debated. Current plans for the Summit at Coates Run complex call for building enough room for 870 tenants, but the complex has been delayed by a lawsuit and regulatory hurdles.

The Copper Beach proposal appears to be in limbo or dead, though, as city officials say they have heard nothing from the developers in several months, and the plans are not moving forward.

Not having the Copper Beach complex and an uncertain future for the Summit at Coates Run complex would appear to leave the city short of housing, for the time being, if the enrollment projections are met by 2015. Obviously, there is still time to build other apartment complexes in the city.

Abel said that one way to see the need for more student housing in Athens is to just look at the number of developers interested in building complexes in Athens.

"There obviously are companies that are going to be investing millions of dollars," Abel said. In addition to having a limited amount of housing, much of the student housing is also getting older, Abel noted.

The Off-Campus Capacity Analysis study states that the average age of all of the apartment complexes in Athens is 23 years, and only the River's Edge and University Courtyard complexes are less than five years old.

OU Planner Pam Callahan said that while the study says the new student-apartment complexes are needed, that does not mean the university will push for new complexes or take actions to support them.

The university had the study completed because it wanted to look at the capacity in the city, and wanted to hear what outside experts would say, Callahan said.

"The university is interested in safe and quality housing for its students," she said. She added that the study was done with the city, and just provides information for the city and the university. "I just see it as a planning option," Callahan said.