

Student housing at CGCC unlikely for now

By Kyle Adams Hudson-Catskill Newspapers | Posted: Tuesday, March 19, 2013 12:30 am

GREENPORT — Columbia-Greene Community College has been pondering the idea of on-campus student housing for about 10 years, and at Monday's board of trustees meeting, they got an answer: not now.

The board was presented with the results of a feasibility study conducted by the program management firm Brailsford & Dunlavey, which concluded that the relatively low demand for on-campus housing at C-GCC made the project economically impractical.

“What we wanted to learn was, is it feasible to build a dorm on this campus?” said C-GCC President James Campion. “And based on what we've learned from the survey, the answer to that seems to be at this time that would be very difficult to finance just because of the scale, because of the numbers involved in the current environment.”

The study looked at the current off-campus housing market, student demographics and student demand for on-campus housing, then generated a financial model. Based on the findings, the college could reasonably support a 100-bed housing unit, which would not generate enough initial revenue to support quality construction. None of C-GCC's peer schools, most of which have student housing, have less than 200-bed units.

“The more beds you build, the more economies of scale you have,” said Greg Wachalski, vice president of Brailsford & Dunlavey, in his presentation to the board. “Typically, the true economies of scale start at about 300 beds because of some fixed costs — site development costs, utility costs. There are projects of 100 beds or even less, all strategically driven, but they're not necessarily the most economical projects to build.”

The construction costs at 100 beds, between \$7.6 million and \$6 million depending on room configurations, translates to between \$90 and \$95 per square foot — which means low quality construction.

“I think that doing a quality housing project would be very, very challenging at this level,” said Wachalski. “I honestly wouldn't recommend building student housing at \$90 per square foot.”

The current enrollment at the college is about 2,100 students, split fairly evenly between full-time and part-time. The study focused on full-time students, as part-timers are unlikely to be interested. From there, it was further narrowed through a variety of filters and split into two groups most likely to take advantage of on-campus housing: renters living off-campus, single, under 26 and paying \$300 or more in rent; and students living with parents or relatives, single, under 26, who drive more than 30 minutes to the college. “Even though they expressed an interest in living on campus, if they only have to drive five minutes to get here, we felt it was unlikely that they'd sign an on-campus lease,” said Daniel Durack, project manager at Brailsford & Dunlavey, in the presentation.

This second group is riskier than the first, since those who live with parents may say they want to live on campus, but “when push comes to shove, it's often the parents who make the decision.” said Wachalski. The financial model reflected that, counting on just two-thirds of that group to actually take advantage of on-campus housing.

It was no surprise to board members that the study showed decreasing full-time enrollment projections through 2017, a pattern common to rural community colleges in New York. However, in the past three years, the decrease in full-time students has been offset by an increase in part-timers. Campion and others were considering on-campus housing as one way to bring more students to the college, making it more attractive to locals looking for the “university experience” while also making it an option for students from outside the two-county area.

Monday's presenters noted that while students often rate housing as desirable, the experiences of C-GCC's peer schools don't show a correlation between on-campus housing and rising enrollment.

"Columbia-Greene needs to expand their recruiting footprint and housing could potentially be one tool to do that with a focus on full-time students," said Durack. "The majority of New York State rural community colleges have housing. But as I said before, housing doesn't necessarily guarantee an increase in full-time enrollment, but it does provide recruiting flexibility."

Campion said the report gave the board a lot of good information to move forward with, even if it's not in the direction of on-campus housing. They may need to focus more on "magnet programs" that draw students, or perhaps explore alternative solutions for student housing. The study of the housing market surrounding the college concluded that it was "not student-friendly," with lots of vacation rentals and expensive housing and few places where students could live together as a community.

"A lot of good material is coming out of this," said Campion. "For me, reflecting on that lack of student-friendly housing in the area, an investor might think, 'There's a market.' ... I'm very optimistic that this isn't closing any doors this evening."

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