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## Show Low explores possibility of convention center

By Laura Singleton The Independent Jun 13, 2017



Robin Scott Hunden, of Hunden Strategic Partners, presents a convention center feasibility study June 6 to the Show Low City Council.

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SHOW LOW — The City of Show Low is exploring the possibility of building a convention center.

But can the city afford it?

That's the question the city council tried to answer during a study session June 6. It was also the first time the idea of building a convention center was introduced to the public.

During the study session, the council listened to representatives from a private consulting firm and industry experts as they presented specific information regarding the feasibility of a convention center in the White Mountains. No plans have been approved; it was only an informational meeting.

Robin Scott Hunden, of Hunden Strategic Partners, and David Greusel, of Convergence Design, provided an in-depth presentation which included economic, demographic and financial data specific to the White Mountain region. Hunden and Greusel were tasked with the question, "What type of event or convention center would optimally fit in this community?" Other questions the council asked of the experts include, but were not limited to:

- What demand is currently not being met by existing facilities that have a maximum of 125 person occupancy?
- Is there a legitimate need for a 300-500 person event facility?
- Does Show Low have adequate hotel space to host an event of this size?
- How big is the existing tourism trade in the White Mountains?
- What type of facility would accommodate meetings, conferences, trade shows and sporting events?
- Are local businesses booking events in Phoenix, Flagstaff or other cities because Show Low does not have adequate facilities?
- Is the seasonal activity robust enough to offset the cost of a facility that may not be booked to capacity year round?

- Who would run, manage and actively market such a facility?
- Is the infrastructure in Show Low big enough to accommodate larger groups?
- How long would it be before such a facility would “break even?” Will there be a return on the investment and in what form?
- What initial investment is required to build such a facility? If it can be done in phases, what is the cost of the first phase?

One thing the council and consultants seemed to agree upon is that large events in Show Low and the surrounding areas tend to be tourism-based. This means events are not necessarily “money-making” endeavors, comparable to those of a typical convention center.

Another common theme was that local residents and businesses expressed a need for a additional options when hosting a large event. Hunden and Gruesel shared findings about existing event venues.

For example, Hon-Dah Casino and Resort is one of the largest and most accommodating facilities that is frequently used. However, challenges with distance from Show Low and seasonal competing events at the resort limit its viability in the overall equation. In addition, the study session recognized that schools and religious groups often have issues with conducting an event at a place of gambling. The need for a smoke-free environment was also discussed.

All agreed that a “multi-purpose” facility would have the most success in this demographic. To elaborate, several council members agreed that “multi-purpose” would be the best type of facility to consider. Multi-purpose became defined as a venue that is capable of handling banquets, weddings, trade shows, exhibits, card show, sporting events, tournaments, meetings, conferences and lectures.

Project cost and scope was of the utmost importance. Cost could not be determined without a narrowly defined scope. **Hunden and Greusel** provided a wide array of comparable facility examples which included extremely detailed size, cost and adaptability data. Out of this came the understanding that a project of this nature could be built in phases to spread the cost over a longer period of time. **Hunden** emphasize how “you can build anything in phases and it doesn’t have to be a gazillion dollars. It just has to be smartly built.”

Hunden also explained that there are three critical elements to any successful facility:

- The center or facility needs to be of high quality and run well.
- An adequate infrastructure with a hotel package that can support the hosted events must exist.
- There must be a professional, dedicated marketing arm of the facility and it must be actively marketed to maintain maximum usage throughout the year.

Greusel also explained the “SMERF” formula, which shows that the most successful facilities are flexible enough to meet the needs of these groups: Social, Military, Educational, Religious and Fraternal organizations or groups.

At the end of the study session, the council felt it was appropriate to continue gathering information and having discussion about the pros and cons of such a project. In addition, **Handen and Greusel** provided hard copies of their presentation in its entirety as the study session was a condensed version of the collected information. This information will also be made available to the public through the City of Show Low’s website, <http://showlowaz.gov>.

Should the council arrive at a juncture where they feel a multi-purpose facility is needed, they will enlist additional public involvement, comment and input.

Show Low City Council meetings are broadcast live at 7 p.m. the first and third Tuesdays of each month on Cable Channel 56 and Show Low TV. They are also open to the public and conducted in the City Council Chambers, 181 N. 9th St., Show Low.

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