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## **Chesapeake turning into a hotel hub for Hampton Roads**

CHESAPEAKE - Crossways Boulevard is lined by a Circuit City, a Joe's Crab Shack and a Lone Star Steakhouse and Saloon, but as the road winds toward Interstate 64, the restaurants and shopping centers fall away and motorists drive into a compound of beige buildings with white railings and well-kept lawns.

There the marquees read Fairfield Inn, Comfort Suites, Extended Stay of America, Sun Suites and Residence Inn.

City leaders call the stretch "Hotel Row," and its success has been attributed to a boom in the local hotel market. Some have pointed to the expansion as an unexpected side effect of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. Others think its success is rooted in the Chesapeake Conference Center. Still others say the stream of reservations is from the hotels' proximity to the Chilled Ponds recreation center, which hosts hockey tournaments at least 28 weekends a year.

Regardless of the reason, more contractors, consultants and cheering parents have driven to Hampton Roads and subsequently rested their weary heads on pillows in Chesapeake. The location allows travelers to stay away from tourists at the Oceanfront in Virginia Beach but remain close to businesses in Norfolk.

Now, more beds are on the way.

Wednesday, the Planning Commission will consider an application for a new Hyatt Place Hotel at Towne Place. It is one of nine new hotels in Chesapeake projected to open this year, according to the city budget. If that projection holds, it will mark an approximate 20 percent increase in the number of hotels in Chesapeake.

Officials from the city's economic development department said this week that at least two other hotels are considering opening in the Greenbrier area. Greenbrier already features 20 hotels with more than 2,300 rooms.

"It's kind of a traveler's hub," said Jerry Donnelly, the owner/operator of a nearby Gold's Gym, which serves as a workout center for some local hotels.

In the early 1990s, business travelers struggled to find meeting rooms in Chesapeake, often traveling to Norfolk for meetings. But during the last decade, Chesapeake has doubled its number of hotel rooms.

Now, signs along Hotel Row offer wireless Internet access and efficiency studios. They boast free local calls and full kitchens. Jesse Williams, director of the Chesapeake division of the Hampton Roads Chamber of Commerce, said the city's hotel business is all about location.

"It takes 10 minutes to get downtown," he said. "It really doesn't take long to get to the Town Center in Virginia Beach."

As a result, the hotel boom is paying dividends for Chesapeake.

Taxes from hotel rooms are expected to generate more than \$3 million for the city this year and more than \$4 million next year.

LTD Management Group started with one hotel in Greenbrier, then added two more in 1998. Today, the group has five hotels in the Greenbrier area and a total of seven in Chesapeake, said Kimberly Schlick, the company's corporate director of sales and marketing.

She said travelers aren't just paying the lodging tax, but dining at local restaurants and filling rental cars at nearby gas stations.

Figures from the Virginia Tourism Corporation show Chesapeake has the highest occupancy rates for the first half of the year of any city in Hampton Roads and among the highest rates in the commonwealth. In July 2006, Greenbrier's hotel occupancy rate reached 85 percent.

On Tuesdays and Wednesdays, operators said, vacancies are rare.

By Friday afternoon, the parking lots are less crowded and the business travelers on their way back home.