

EDC: Okaloosa lacks gas stations, book and music stores

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A new study arranged by the Okaloosa County Economic Development Council could help attract new retail stores, restaurants and other service-sector businesses to the area.

The EDC partnered with the cities and chambers of commerce in the county to compile a study that evaluated retail and service-sector needs. The study, which was completed in October, was conducted by the University of West Florida's Haas Center for Business Research and Economic Development.

- [View the EDC report.](#)

"Okaloosa County as a whole is doing excellent in serving the needs of its residents in the retail and service industries," Kay Rasmussen, vice president of the EDC, said in an interview Wednesday. "It's not only meeting the needs of its residents, but Okaloosa County as a whole is providing a surplus of services to non-residents — that's our tourism industry."

According to the Haas report, the county has roughly a 9 percent surplus of automobile dealerships, a 30 percent surplus of full-service restaurants and a 37 percent surplus of bars.

However, the study did spotlight some gaps. Specifically, it states there is a 19 percent shortage of gas stations and a 17 percent shortfall of book, periodical and music stores.

"Before the chambers or anybody can work to try to recruit businesses, you have to know what to recruit," Rasmussen said. "If you have a surplus of pet stores, you don't want to bring in another pet store. It probably won't survive, or if it does it will probably put somebody out of business because what this all boils down to is supply and demand. You want to see where the needs are and then you want to meet those needs.

"I saw this as a way to assist our chambers and our local business community," she added.

In addition to studying the county as a whole, the Haas Center also analyzed the greater Fort Walton Beach area (including Mary Esther, Cinco Bayou and Shalimar), Destin, Niceville-Valparaiso and Crestview.

All four cities have a shortfall of gas stations. Destin is the only city to have a surplus of book stores.

Niceville-Valparaiso has numerous shortfalls, but Rasmussen said the new Walmart would ease many of them if the study was updated.

Fort Walton Beach had a slight shortfall in electronics and appliances stores.

Destin had a shortfall in building materials/supply dealers and lawn and garden stores. But that need could be eased if the study was updated to include the new Lowe's.

Crestview had a slight leak in furniture and home furnishing stores.

Wayne Harris, president of the Crestview Area Chamber of Commerce and an Okaloosa County commissioner, said the report will help him market Crestview.

"This is what a business will use to make its decision on where to go and where not to go," Harris said. "This to me was a very comprehensive and right-on analysis of the problems in Okaloosa County.

"It helps me market the area," he added. "I will use and have used it as part of my economic profile, which details everything that is going on and all things that are happening, the demographics for the north county area."

Since the report was released, Harris said he has had a number of calls from people interested in opening businesses in the Crestview area. He said the study helped draw attention that Crestview is growing and there is a need for those things.

The EDC focuses primarily on attracting information technology, manufacturing and professional and business services jobs. However, Rasmussen said it will continue to work with the chambers to attract new businesses.

"The EDC has its function and the chambers have their function, and together we work and create the perfect environment and we cover everything comprehensively together for our community," she said.

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