Convention plans wrap up, time to start booking

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LAFAYETTE — Final plans for the new 40,000-square-foot Cajundome Convention Center, to be located next door to the Dome, have been submitted to the Cajundome Commission.

With a groundbreaking likely set for early 1999, Cajundome Director Greg Davis, who is managing the project, said it's time to start pitching the building to prospective clients.

"We're close to (being able) to start marketing the center and booking major conventions," Davis said Monday at the commission's monthly meeting.

Construction of the center, estimated to cost $9.6 million, could start in early 1999. Building a clientele to fill it when it does open should start now, he said.

"If this building is going to be busy when it opens, we need to start aggressively marketing it now," Davis said, adding that many groups plan conventions up to three years in advance.

That in mind, Davis asked the commission to approve the hiring of a sales manager and marketing secretary for the next fiscal year, which begins Nov. 1. A decision on that will come at the September meeting. The search for the sales manager would begin as soon as bids are accepted.

The building, which could draw events like the Louisiana Gulf Coast Oil Exposition — the biennial oil trade show — should take between 18 and 24 months to complete, Davis said.

The project was originally estimated at a cost of $9.6 million, but with Lafayette's booming economy, it may cost more as construction companies are already ripe with money-making opportunities.

"Our concern is that the market condition could impact the bid in such a way that it could be outside of the budget of $9.6 million," Davis said.

The overall success of a convention center, Davis said, cannot be quantified by the number of conventions, attendance figures or other in-house numbers.

The true measure of its success will be in its economic impact on the community at large.

The Cajundome is expected to bring $34 million into the local economy in 1999, according to estimates. Davis said it was too early to tell what kind of impact the center might have, but said it would be substantial.

"We are in the process of preparing a five-year business plan, and once that plan is complete, we will have the economic impact information," Davis said.