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Hotel activity could buzz again soon at Oakwood exit

With road improvements, lodging business is picking back up off I-985

Oakwood once was the South Hall hub for hotels, but then came the perfect storm: the Great Recession and a \$75 million reworking of Interstate 985 at Mundy Mill Road.

And now, from appearances, hotel activity seems to have fallen sharply at the otherwise busy interchange. But, officials say, a resurgence could be on the way — good news for the area’s tourism industry.

“Oakwood is our most visually dynamic exit for visitors, because when you’re traveling up I-985, you can see lodging, dining, gas and all the services a visitor would anticipate,” said Stacey Dickson, president of the Lake Lanier Convention and Visitors Bureau. “Oakwood has been an anchor for us.”

At one time, the interchange held three hotel properties: Comfort Inn, Country Inn & Suites and the Inn at Oakwood. Farther down Mundy Mill Road is Jameson Inn, which sits off the newly built final segment of Thurmon Tanner Parkway.

“We’ve seen some changes for all of our properties with the economy, which has been a challenge, but one of the contributing factors in Oakwood has been the much-needed (road) improvements,” Dickson said.

“The (new) median and the changes in the access points along Mundy Mill Road had an impact, especially for the lodging properties.”

Country Inn & Suites has been shuttered for about a year. Also closed is the Inn at Oakwood, perhaps best known to longtime

residents as the old Admiral Benbow Inn. Both were off Oakwood Road.

A Best Western Plus appears set to take over the former Country Inn & Suites, possibly this fall.

“We do know there’s a contractor over doing some aesthetic type of work,” City Manager Stan Brown said.

“They’ve been working on it for several months trying to get (it) into good shape.”

According to the hotel chain's website, Best Western Plus hotels have a minimum three-diamond AAA rating.

They feature "an enhanced level of comfort."

"We're starting to integrate that information into all of our marketing materials and website," Dickson said. "We'll be thrilled to bring that back into our inventory."

Brown said he has met with the Inn at Oakwood owner, who "was looking at doing some demolition of part of the facility.

"There are five buildings there and two of them are newer than the other three."

The owner didn't have specific plans, "just looking at maybe trying to redevelop the property," Brown said.

The Comfort Inn, which sits between Branch and Mundy Mill roads and has a covering draped over its sign, is undergoing changes of its own, Dickson said.

"They're changing ... from one national brand family to another, so they are in this transition period," she said.

"They're still open and operating and all that; they're just in the middle of this brand change."

She said management companies that are liquidating or consolidating properties commonly change within the brand name.

"It's very common across the industry for hotels to be bagged — the sign gets a bag put over it — and they go through this process of changing all of their printed materials, in-room amenities, their linens, whatever, to meet the new brand's standards," Dickson said.

"Then, the new sign goes up and they get unbagged into their new property."

Overall, Dickson said, "Oakwood is in sort of a minirenaissance for lodging."

She said tourism officials are "turning backflips" over renovations at the old Country Inn & Suites.

"It's going to be like a brand-new hotel. It's amazing the work they've done there," Dickson said.

The Jameson Inn, on the other hand, has benefited from the opening of the four-lane Thurmon Tanner, which now runs from Exit 17 at Oakwood to Phil Niekro Boulevard, off Exit 12 in Flowery Branch.

"Their location, with the new road, made their curb appeal and visual acuity from the public just go off the charts," Dickson said.

Contacts for the four hotel properties could not be reached for comment.

“We’re encouraged to see that the Best Western is looking at coming online and we’re hopeful that the Comfort Inn is working toward reworking its property,” Brown said. “And we think the (Inn at Oakwood) property has a lot of value to it and we hope to see a good, quality development come in there.”

Brown also sees other lodging possibilities in the I-985 area, as the economy rebounds.

“I think there’s definitely some locations that have possibilities,” he said.