

Community college gains traction

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Clayten Bell, left, and Harley Maxwell, both first-year automotive mechanic students, use their free time Friday to work on assignments outside of a classroom at Eastern Idaho Technical College. Pat Sutphin / psutphin@postregister.com



Hailey Mark, career placement and recruitment coordinator for Eastern Idaho Technical College, talks about some of the changes that would come if EITC was turned into a community college. Mark said the college wouldn't have to build any new facilities to accommodate extra students, but it would need to hire additional professors. "In my opinion, having a community college just makes it so we can offer more opportunities to the students," she said. Pat Sutphin / psutphin@postregister.com



Casper

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The seeds have been planted, but it's too early to tell if the latest push to establish an Idaho Falls-based community college will bear fruit.

Idaho Falls Mayor Rebecca Casper is at the forefront of a loose-knit group of residents calling for examination of the idea. The mayor, for more than a year, has pushed for a broader conversation on the topic among area residents.

In recent months, the effort has gained much-needed support.

In January 2015, the Twin Falls-based College of Southern Idaho opened a branch in Idaho Falls, which officials hope will help pave the way for a full-fledged community college here. The school previously had offered classes on the Eastern Idaho Technical College campus.

Last summer, Rick Aman was named interim president at EITC. Aman, who has since been named president, came to EITC from the College of Western Idaho, where he helped establish that college from scratch.

Then, this month, Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter extended a formal invitation for eastern Idahoans to reconsider converting EITC into a fully-accredited community college.

"I'd like to invite the people of eastern Idaho to advance their ongoing discussions about making Eastern Idaho Technical College a full-featured community college," Otter said in his State of the State address.

Otter's proposed budget contains \$5 million for such a plan.

If the proposal is eventually approved, transforming EITC into a community college would be relatively painless because EITC already has much of the infrastructure in place.

Compared to the College of Western Idaho, which was founded in 2007 from nothing, EITC (with an enrollment of about 700 students), would avoid the two biggest difficulties in opening a community college; constructing buildings and applying for fresh accreditation from the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.

CWI is still waiting to receive its accreditation, a process that takes roughly four to six years. In the meantime, its students have been receiving their degrees from the College of Southern Idaho. EITC, however, is already accredited as a technical college, so it has fewer steps in the process to overcome.

“It’s basically paperwork. For us it would take maybe a year to work through,” Aman said. “But we don’t have to start from scratch, so that makes it quite easy.”

If the conversion was approved, EITC’s technical schools — business, mechanical and health — would remain intact, and class would go on uninterrupted.

The main difference between a technical and community college is the mission pursued by each. A technical college primarily offers a hands-on experience with a focus on terminal degrees, which means that if you get a degree in welding from EITC, you are ready to become a welder. Community colleges place a much greater emphasis on general education courses — science, math, history — in an effort to prepare students to attend four-year universities.

An Idaho Falls-based community college would lower the overall cost of completing a degree for local college students.

Practically, the main difference between EITC and a prospective community college would be in staff. An eastern Idaho community college would need to hire more professors to be able to offer more general education courses.

And if a community college in Idaho Falls was approved, the faculty at CSI’s Idaho Falls campus would provide an instant pool of potential employees — including 16 adjunct professors.

“There’s a good chance with the conversion that a lot of the adjuncts and the administrators would just kind of float into the eastern Idaho community college system, and either become adjuncts there or full-time faculty,” said Josh Sakelaris, director of CSI’s Idaho Falls campus. “This is really not our market; it would be eastern Idaho community college turf. CSI is just helping establish that.”

CSI’s Idaho Falls campus also has an enrollment of about 200 students, though the college doesn’t keep track. Those students likely would transfer to an eastern Idaho community college as well.

Post-conversion, community college classes would be small, about 20 to 30 students, and relatively inexpensive at roughly half the cost per credit of a state university.

Getting the proposal to ballot would require a **1,000-signature petition**; then a taxing district would be established. After that, the project would need to be approved by a supermajority vote within that district, meaning it would have to be backed by two-thirds of voters.

Other counties would also be able to **opt in** to the district with a simple majority vote to increase its property taxes to help pay for the community college. If a student attends a community college

outside of their county, and that county hasn't opted in, that student's county of origin pays an additional \$50 per credit from its liquor tax funds to the community college's home county.

Opting in would widen the base of taxpayers paying for the community college, and it would prevent liquor tax funds from shifting counties.

The CWI community college district is comprised of Ada County and Canyon County, the college's [website](#) said. The Idaho Statesman reports CWI has more than 10,000 credit-seeking students and an additional 10,400 students are enrolled in workforce-development and basic-skills education classes that don't provide college credit.

Otter said in his State of the State address that CWI has grown faster than any community college in American history.

The most difficult part of establishing a community college is securing the supermajority vote, which would increase property taxes for residents inside the taxing district.

"This will be a decision our community will make rather than the Legislature," said Rep. Wendy Horman, R-Idaho Falls.

In 1991, the last time a community college was on the ballot, locals overwhelmingly voted against it. Still, some are optimistic of a community college's chance of gaining voter approval.

"When I made my announcement speech to run for mayor, I spoke about the need to reexamine the issue of a community college, and my comments were met with applause," Casper said. "It's time we start taking those conversations to the broader public."

Casper said she hopes to encourage further discussions in February, potentially with the help of citizen panels.

The money Otter set aside for examining the potential eastern Idaho community college is pending approval by the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee (and then the House of Representatives and Senate for the overall budget).

"My budget recommendation includes \$5 million to support such a plan for making less costly and more flexible education beyond high school accessible to more citizens on that side of our state," Otter said in his address.

Apart from the increased property taxes, additional funding would come from out-of-district students via liquor tax funds.

At this stage in the planning process, no figures have been released regarding the total cost of the conversion, though Aman said that the state government's \$5 million "would go a long way."

"A lot of the cost would be in people. We're really talking about a significant number of hires, especially in general education and workforce development," Aman said.

The second biggest expense would be in retrofitting certain classrooms into science labs in order to accommodate a community college curriculum.

“Because we already have a college, and systems in place — a business office, student services — it would literally take about four months to get up and running as a full community college,” Aman said. “We could put 3,000 students on campus and not have to put up another building.”

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