

Regents propose new education center in Rapid City

By Kayla Gahagan, Journal staff Wednesday, January 16, 2008

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Students taking long-distance courses in Rapid City from one of the state's universities might not have to hustle around town anymore to get to classes if the Board of Regents has its way.

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In a bill expected to be submitted next week, the board will ask for the authority to accept 12 acres of donated land and to bond \$15.4 million to build an education facility. The regents will also ask for debt service to be paid out of the general fund.

The center, which board president Harvey Jewett said is not another university, would serve the 1,700 students taking classes and earning degrees through Black Hills State University, Dakota State University, Northern State University, South Dakota State University and the University of South Dakota. It would be called the Higher Education Center - West River.

Until two years ago, higher-education classes were held at Ellsworth Air Force Base. In 2006, the educational facility at the base was converted to a call center, and class locations were split among nine sites in Rapid City.

"It's very much like we got hit by a tornado or fire and lost a building," Jewett said Tuesday morning in a meeting with the Rapid City Chamber of Commerce.

When two classes run consecutively in one evening, students can take only one because they don't have time to get across town to the other, he said.

"That means students can only take one class a year," he said. "If you're trying to get your MBA, that means six years instead of three."

Tad Perry, executive director of the Board of Regents, agreed.

"As you have multiple sites, you confuse students and make it inconvenient. It just doesn't serve their needs," he said.

It could be a tough sell to the Legislature, Perry said, which will also see a \$75 million appropriations bill from the Regents to upgrade lab facilities at the state's universities.

"If this is going to succeed, it's going to need a lot of community push," Perry said.

If only a portion of it is approved, funding alternatives include using \$2.5 million from the Higher Education Facilities Fund, which comes from student tuition, and private fundraising.

The new building is proposed to be 47,125 square feet and include 24 classrooms, computer and science labs, a bookstore, lounge and offices.

The land, south of Interstate 90 at Exit 61 on Cheyenne Road, was donated by Regent Kathy Johnson. It hasn't been assessed for value yet, Jewett said.

"It's a great location," Johnson said, because it's easily accessible and visible from the interstate. "We need to do this for the local people. I feel so strongly that it's needed here."

Jewett and Perry predict that opponents to the bill will probably be people who don't support the idea of distance education or don't understand that it isn't a new college or university.

"Opponents will say, 'Well, why not just close one of the institutions?'" Perry said. "That misses the point. The (distance learning) serves a different population."

A majority of the students taking distance classes are nontraditional -- older than 18 to 22 -- he added, and, banking on the success of a similar center in Sioux Falls, there's lots of room for growth.

"You'll be at 2,500 (students) within three to four years, easily," Perry said.

South Dakota School of Mines & Technology President Charles Ruch said he supports the plan.

"It is clearly much needed, and this is a very viable solution," he said. "We're excited about it."

Johnson said it's important for people not to confuse it with something it isn't.

"It's just a delivery point for existing universities," she said. "There are no degrees given. It's not a campus; there are no dorms. It's just for classrooms."

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