Bonding together

Business, academia join forces to build support for higher ed ballot measure

BY MELINDA CALIENDO

BORROWING MEASURES AREN'T always embraced by New Jersey's business community, but a group of nearly 200 corporations, associations, unions and schools is working to build support for the $750 million higher education bond referendum appearing on next month's ballot.

Supporters of the measure, which include Public Service Enterprise Group Chief Executive Ralph Izzo, say greater investment in New Jersey's schools can develop public-private partnerships, cultivate a better-educated labor pool and deter employers from taking jobs across state lines.

The ballot question appears just weeks after Roche announced it would build a new research center in New York's Alexandria Center for Life Science, rejecting overtures from New Jersey, which does not yet have such a hub in place.

"In New Jersey, we have a knowledge economy, and we must provide the educational and research programs that will yield a rich relationship with business and industry," said Montclair State University President Susan A. Cole. Roche's decision, she said, highlights the need for new facilities, as New Jersey has "not built capacity anywhere near the way we should in fields that are so important to our pharmaceutical and medical technology industries."

"We can't sit on our hands and expect it will be all right," she said.

New Jersey is one of five states that has not publicly funded capital improvements at the higher education level since the late 1980s. If approved, funding will be appropriated to academic projects at the state's colleges and universities.

Rutgers University leads the academic community in supporting the initiative, a role its president, Dr. Robert Barchi, said is a "responsibility" of the largest school in the state.

"We are the state university, and part of our job is to educate the population," Barchi said. "We have the most connections in terms of alumni, students and staff, and therefore we have the biggest obligation to get the word out there, for sure. No doubt about it."

"Our company buys the same equipment as every other company in our industry, but what differentiates us is the quality of our employees," said Izzo, also chairman of Rutgers' board of governors, at a rally to support the referendum. "The quality of our employees is not only driven by how hard they work, but by how well they're educated."

And for companies looking to partner with universities to take advantage of the ivory tower's research capabilities, the timing also is advantageous.
“There is a clear, new direction and approach on the part of the higher education community to partner with the business community,” said Ali Houshmand, interim president of Rowan University. “This is exactly the time the business community and higher education should partner in really growing the capacity of our education. If the bond is successful, clearly the business community will be at the forefront of building the infrastructure.”

“Products come out of these things — stuff that could get commercialized,” said Joel Bloom, president of the New Jersey Institute of Technology. Improved facilities will lead to new collaboration, and eventually commercialization, between businesses and academia, he said, adding that NJIT researchers hold 171 patents, including 60 that are licensed to third parties.

But Steve Lonegan, former Bogota mayor and president of the New Jersey chapter of Americans for Prosperity, said the bond would be a poor business investment, especially considering the state’s current deficit.

“The idea of borrowing all of this money to create temporary construction jobs is just a huge mistake,” Lonegan said. He said the bond issue would be on par with subsidies to the Revel and Xanadu projects as an expensive non-solution to the state’s economic woes.

Additionally, Lonegan said, New Jersey has too many college graduates who can’t find work, and schools are underutilizing the space they already have. He pointed to a 2006 state Supreme Court decision to prevent a $5.5 million expansion for Warren County Community College, as the school was “only open four days a week, because kids didn’t want to go to school on Friday.”

Barchi called the instant impact of bond funding a “critical multiplier” that will not be measured by just the money spent on projects. He said ignoring the ripple effect of putting more people to work — union or not — would be extremely shortsighted.

A challenge for academia has been drawing support to the cause, as universities are not permitted to lobby. A Fairleigh Dickinson University PublicMind poll released last week showed nearly nine in 10 voters have heard “little” or “nothing” about the bond issue.

“We’ll live with whatever choice the citizens of the state make, as long as we’re comfortable that they made a choice,” Barichi said. “It would truly be unfortunate if the decision were made by a small number of voters who happen to be aware of the issue, and their collective opinion did not reflect the consensus of the voters as a whole.”

Kathleen Waldron, president of William Paterson University, said she’s using every opportunity to educate people about the referendum, whether through letters, speeches or social media. She said a lot of people are unaware of the issue, though she doesn’t hear much dissent.

But that’s cause for concern on a long ballot packed with presidential, senate and local races.

“It’s such an important statement for the state and the citizens of the state to return to funding higher education,” Waldron said. “And it’s the only way this state is going to remain competitive.”

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Wish lists
A summary of planned investments by New Jersey schools that would be funded through the bond measure.

Montclair: Add an environmental and life sciences facility; replace business school facilities; new studios and production spaces for the communications and media program.

NJIT: Rehabilitate the former Newark Central High School into smart classrooms and project-based learning spaces; build a Center for Integrative Life Sciences and Engineering as an addition to a current building; update laboratories.

Rowan: New life sciences building in Camden; new business and liberal arts buildings on Glassboro campus.

Rutgers: New chemistry building in New Brunswick to replace one built in 1947; expanded library capacity at Rutgers-Newark; a new science building in Camden.

William Paterson: A new life sciences academic building for nursing programs, which will allow space for refurbishing current facilities in a “tiered” manner. – Melinda Caliendo
Robert Barchi is playing a key role in drumming up corporate support for a bond issue appearing on November's ballot.