

Group wants voters to help colleges

\$750M bond on Nov. ballot for construction, renovation

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A bipartisan group of supporters came to an aging classroom building at William Paterson University on Wednesday to push for passage of a \$750 million bond to fund construction and renovation projects at all of New Jersey's state colleges and universities.

The bond referendum will appear on the crowded presidential ballot – which also includes local and state races – next month.

Opponents say the state can't afford more borrowing, but others say New Jersey is overdue for the investment in higher education, which will also generate an estimated 10,000 construction jobs.

"Sometimes you have to spend money to make things happen," said state Senate President Stephen Sweeney, D-Gloucester, who came to the Wayne campus with Senate Minority Leader Tom Kean Jr., R-Union.

The group toured the 1950s-era Hunziker Hall, which is in line for \$30 million in renovations if the bond passes.

Later, at an editorial board at The Record, Kean's father, former Gov. Tom Kean, joined in the chorus of support for the bond.

"This should have been done a long time ago," said Kean, who served as president of Drew University in Madison after he was governor. He noted that the last statewide higher education bond was in 1988, when he was governor and Ronald Reagan was president.

In the decades since, enrollment has mushroomed at the schools, which have borrowed heavily to fund capital projects – a cost that is passed to those who pay tuition. Annual tuition at most of the public four-year colleges in the state tops \$11,000.

"We've raised tuition to the point where it's very difficult for low-income kids," said the former governor.

Sweeney, an official with the Ironworkers union, touted the construction jobs the bill would provide.

The bond would fund projects at 57 colleges and universities across the state, including private schools and community colleges. The schools would be required to provide 25 percent of matching dollars for projects, which would be limited to those dealing with academic space, such as classrooms and laboratories.

The matching funds increase the cost of the initiative to \$1 billion.

"The state already has billions in debt – we just can't borrow any more money," said Steve Lonegan, a William Paterson alumnus who heads the conservative group Americans for Progress-New Jersey.

Lonegan disputed schools' claims that they need more buildings to meet capacity, pointing out that the enrollment boom has already peaked and that most state schools don't fully utilize existing facilities because they have light schedules on Fridays and Saturdays.

"Fiscal conservatives have a big problem with this," said Lonegan. "I don't think it will take a lot to beat this."

Push at schools

A lobbying group called Building our Future is pushing the bond across the state, holding a rally at Rutgers University in New Brunswick last week and arranging the tour in Wayne.

The bond is supported by the construction trades unions, and Tom Kean Jr. pointed to the bipartisan support for the bond in

Sweeney said the effort is needed to combat so-called voter fatigue because the bond is at the end of a long ballot.

He said the investment in higher education is needed to stem the flight of jobs from the state, citing recent losses in the pharmaceutical industry.

"Other states are making the investment, and we're not," said Sweeney. "We want to win big – it's important to send a message to the world that New Jersey is committed to higher education."

Kathleen Waldron, president of William Paterson, said she hoped the university could renovate Hunziker, which houses nursing and community-health programs. The school also wants to build another academic building to provide more classroom space on campus.

Both projects could serve 7,000 students, she said.

Sweeney said that, like William Paterson, colleges around the state have "shovel-ready projects."

The bond measure would provide \$300 million for public research universities that include Rutgers, New Jersey Institute of Technology and, soon, Rowan University.

An additional \$247.5 million would be split among the eight state colleges and universities; \$150 million would go to county colleges and \$52.5 million would head to private institutions, except for those with total endowments of more than \$1 billion – an exception meant to exclude well-heeled Princeton University. The Secretary of Higher Education, with approval from the Legislature, will decide which projects get the go-ahead.



TYSON TRISH/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

William Paterson University President Kathleen Waldron, right, at Hunziker Hall with state Sens. Tom Kean Jr. and Stephen Sweeney.