



College board is getting the change it sought

Today we take occasion to salute the board of trustees of Florida Keys Community College for giving the a go-ahead to seek a total of \$63 million in funding from the state Department of Education over five years, beginning in 2009. This action by the board is surely an emphatic endorsement of the transformational strategies now being implemented by President Jill Landesberg-Boyle and her team.

The monies being sought will finance an ambitious but nevertheless realistic menu of capital improvements on the main campus on Stock Island, as well as the establishment of a new campus in Key Largo.

Near-term priorities will focus on much-needed infrastructure improvements: renovations, handicapped access, drainage, landscaping and covered walkways between the buildings. In addition, the funding sought for the first two years (2009 - 2010) will also willbebe invested in programs to support health sciences, arts, physical education, culinary arts, a new building for the marine engineering program and the proposed Key Largo campus. The costs of these enhancements are estimated to be \$13.8 million.

Is it realistic to seek state funding on such a large scale in these challenging economic times? The answer is "yes" -- and for two good reasons.

Student enrollment is projected to increase 8 percent to 10 percent every year over the next five years as a result of greatly expanded course offerings, more convenient class hours and the availability of baccalaureate (four-year) degrees. Moreover, the state universities have begun limiting enrollments and community colleges will have to provide alternatives, especially for students who want undergraduate degrees but can't afford the rising tuitions and living costs of major universities.

A second reason for being optimistic about obtaining these funds is because the state's funding for capital improvements comes from taxes and fees charged to electric utility customers statewide. As ratepayers will know, these funds are increasing, not shrinking.

As John Keogh, FKCC's vice president for Financial and Administrative Affairs, explained to us, the strategy to seek capital funds emerged from an Educational Plant Survey, as required by the Department of Education. This survey employs mathematical calculations to translate projected rates of growth into an estimate of the square footage of physical facilities necessary to support student enrollments and faculty requirements. In short, the funding that is being sought is not a pipe dream or an undocumented wish list.

In our judgment, FKCC's administrators, faculty, staff and student body are entitled to take pride in the remarkable progress that has already been achieved since Dr. Landesberg-Boyle came on board as president. Yes, we're aware that she has ruffled some feathers along the way, and a few malcontents have sought to discredit her. But we applaud her tenacity and persistence nevertheless. She was chosen for the job by the trustees because a "change agent" clearly was needed and she is demonstrating that she knows what to do with that mandate.

Today, FKCC is in the top 25 in enrollment growth among the state's community colleges, a complete reversal of past trends. Student retention is 80 percent, compared witho54 percent in each of the previous two years. Scheduling of classes is now more convenient for students seeking degrees. Faculty salaries have increased across the board. Academic programs have been greatly enlarged and strengthened. Dual enrollment is now offered to Key West, Marathon and Key Largo high school students. The nursing program has been greatly enlarged, thanks in part to grants from Baptist Health sSystems. Many new academic programs have been established to better match the needs of employers in the Keys. Soon, a new marine engineering building will be under construction on the Stock Island campus and an entirely new campus will be created in Key Largo. A student dormitory is under consideration.

If change is what the trustees wanted, they're getting it in spades. If enriched and enlarged educational opportunities are what students want, they now have a college that meets their needs.

-- The Citizen

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