

PUBLIC COLLEGE BILL DEAD

Compromise bill on community college system is in the works, but funding issues unresolved

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BOISE — Nobody is saying Idaho doesn't need to offer more community college courses.

Rising tuition costs and the fact that many high school graduates are academically unprepared to attend college leave Idahoans with few choices. That's resulted in one of the nation's lowest rates of high school graduates attending college.

That worries educators and Idaho's business community.

So there's near unanimity on the need for a statewide community college system.

There is little agreement on how to pay for it, however.

"This is a state program," said Dan Chadwick, executive director of the Idaho Association of Counties. "The state ought to pay for it."

Rep. Ann Rydalch, R-Idaho Falls, thought so as well.

Earlier this session, Rydalch and Senate Education Chairman John Goedde, a Republican from Coeur d'Alene, drew a community college plan to be paid for with sales tax revenues.

Gov. Dirk Kempthorne had other ideas.

The compromise, House Bill 824, was endorsed by the State Board of Education and looked as though it might be the piece that ended a more than 20-year debate. A public hearing before the House Education Committee was scheduled for next week.

Then came Friday.

Goedde stood on the Senate floor and said the community college question probably wouldn't be settled until next year. And the Senate unanimously passed a resolution calling for a summer interim committee to study higher education in Idaho, including community colleges.

The House earlier this month killed a similar resolution.

A few minutes later, Rydalch confirmed that HB 824 is dead. She added, however, that a new community college bill would surface soon. But with the session winding down and some key lawmakers talking about delay, getting something done in the next couple of weeks probably depends on how badly Idaho's outgoing governor wants a community college system.

The problem is an existing community college funding mechanism.

Counties with community colleges can charge other counties \$50 per credit hour for students who attend their schools.

So, if an Idaho Falls resident attends North Idaho College, Bonneville County would fork over a maximum of \$500 per semester to the school.

That money comes from a county's share of liquor funds collected by the state. Fifty percent of those funds — if necessary — must be spent to pay community college tuition.

And that's the catch.

Most of the time, those funds aren't needed.

Because of the limited number of community colleges in Idaho, only 14 counties, including Butte and Custer, have met or exceeded that 50 percent threshold.

Custer County took in \$33,715 in liquor funds in 2005. It paid \$23,150 for its students to attend the College of Southern Idaho.

Butte County took in \$17,386 in liquor funds last year. It paid \$13,350 for its CSI students.

But those counties are the exception. Bonneville County represents the rule.

In 2005, Bonneville County took in nearly \$350,000 in liquor funds. Fifty percent of that is \$175,000, the amount allocated by code for community college tuition.

But because so few Bonneville County students take community college courses, the county spent just \$25,000 on tuition last year.

That left \$324,798 for the county to spend as it pleased.

Ada County enjoyed a liquor fund surplus of \$1.6 million in 2005. In Bannock County, the number is \$286,000. Overall in Idaho last year, the counties took in \$4.9 million in what some consider excess liquor fund dollars.

That leads Kempthorne to believe the counties can afford to help pay for an expanded community college system.

But Chadwick and other county officials point out that they use that money to provide services mandated by the state. That \$324,798 in Bonneville County, for instance, goes into the Justice Fund.

And that encompasses "all the things we're having a difficult time funding," Bonneville County Commission Chairman Roger Christensen said. "Jails. Sheriff. Law enforcement."

But that argument falls flat with Kempthorne, who points out that the state isn't asking for anything not already written in code.

"Our answer will be to go the code," said the governor's policy director, David Lehman. "That 50 percent is specifically set aside for county tuition payments."

For the counties, however, the greatest fear is the unknown.

Eastern Idaho Technical College could someday become Eastern Idaho Community College. More than 1,000 Bonneville County students attend EITC.

That has Christensen and County Clerk Ron Longmore pondering the worst-case scenario, paying \$500 a semester for each of these students, resulting potentially in a tax increase or cuts in services.

"That could be a tremendous impact on our county," Christensen said.

Counties in which tuition demands exceed the 50 percent threshold simply find the money.

Boundary County, for example, took in \$47,526 in liquor funds last year. It paid more than \$77,000 for its residents to attend North Idaho College.

The new community college bill, Rydalch said, would place a firm cap at the 50 percent level.

If tuition needs exceeded the 50 percent, the state would pick up the rest.

How much that would cost the state is unknown, Rydalch said, because nobody knows how many counties would exceed the cap.

Kempthorne's policy director said Friday this isn't a deal-breaker.

"We're not opposed to that," Lehman said.

A cap may not be enough to earn county support, however. Chadwick reiterated Friday that the state should pick up the tab for community colleges. He said even with the cap, three counties — Kootenai, Jerome and Twin Falls — could be facing serious budget shortfalls if the compromise bill passes.