

# The best solution: Let the majority rule

IDAHO STATESMAN - Oct 1, 2006

No more excuses.

It's time for action.

A legislative committee spent the summer studying the need for community colleges; on Tuesday, these lawmakers need to recommend an answer that will break the impasse.

Idaho's embarrassing shortage of two-year colleges hurts high school grads who are unprepared, financially or academically, for the jump to a four-year school. It hurts workers who need training to change careers. It hurts employers who need job training in a hurry, and hurts business recruiters trying to attract employers.

After following this committee's travels across Idaho, we believe the best solution is the simplest one.

Legislators should allow communities to start a two-year school with a simple majority vote — not the unrealistic two-thirds majority now written into state law.

Why is this so important? Let's start with the obvious. Idaho's community college system is broken. The state operates only two two-year colleges — the nearest to Boise is in Twin Falls, two hours away. On top of that, Idaho hasn't opened a community college in more than 40 years. Clearly, the two-thirds voter majority is one obstacle stunting community colleges' growth.

Three universities now offer professional-technical courses — one of a community college's functions — but at Boise State University, the courses are shoehorned onto a crowded campus and don't really fit BSU's long-term ambitions for expanded research.

Ontario, Ore.-based Treasure Valley Community College serves more than 500 students at its Caldwell campus.

Make no mistake, though. Since TVCC spends neither Oregon nor Idaho tax dollars in Caldwell, the school is performing the role of a private two-year school. In that framework, no school will provide a full portfolio of community college services — the school will focus on the most profitable offerings.

A community college should be

publicly funded and locally run. Idaho's community college model works well at Coeur d'Alene's North Idaho College and Twin Falls' College of Southern Idaho, where local governing boards make decisions and respond to work force demands.

CSI President Gerald Beck put it well at a committee hearing last month. A local advisory board gives advice. A strong board of trustees, with hiring and firing authority, gets results. "Either that or there's a pretty tough meeting next meeting," Beck said.

With local control comes an obligation for some local dollars. Just as it makes no sense to run a network of community colleges out of Boise, it's unrealistic to expect the state to pay all the bills.

Local funding provides a reasonable match to the \$21.8 million of state money that goes to Idaho's two community colleges — a number that would have to go up as more colleges come online. And since local communities enjoy the learning opportunities of a two-year school, they should pay a modest cost. NIC and CSI receive roughly 5 percent of property taxes paid in Kootenai, Twin Falls and Jerome counties. For more than 85 percent of property owners in Twin Falls County, the property tax levy for CSI totals less than \$100 a year.

We believe the Treasure Valley should — and easily can — make a similar investment in two-year programs, if legislators help.

Changing the law is no end run around voters, who still would have

final say.

The Boise Metro Chamber of Commerce proposal would require placing a community college question on a November general election or May primary ballot.

We can think of nothing more fair than holding a spirited community debate about educational needs, timing the discussion around other important elections, and then letting the majority decide.

Voters elect governors and legislators by simple majorities. Five years ago, Boise voters invested \$10 million in property taxes in Foothills open space, by simple majority. Nearly seven decades ago, Kootenai County voters had the foresight to create NIC's taxing district, by simple majority. That was a fair proposition then, and it would be today.

And it's about time. This fall, as BSU's enrollment reached 18,876 students, the school had to turn away more than 800 students.

Most of these students won't enroll anywhere, said Ross Borden, an assistant to BSU President Bob Kustra. On Tuesday, legislators can take a simple yet bold step on these students' behalf.

## What's next

The community college committee will meet at 9:30 a.m. Tuesday in Room 328 of the Statehouse. The panel is scheduled to review bills for the 2007 Legislature.

Committee members are co-chair Sen. John Goedde, R-Coeur d'Alene; co-chair Rep. Darrell Bolz, R-Caldwell; Sen. John Andreason, R-Boise; Sen. Dean Cameron, R-Rupert; Sen. Bart Davis, R-Idaho Falls; Sen.

David Langhorst, D-Boise; Sen. Brad Little, R-Emmett; Sen. Patti Anne Lodge, R-Huston; Sen. Edgar Malepeai, D-Pocatello; Sen. Joe Stegner, R-Lewiston; Rep. Donna Boe, D-Pocatello; Rep. Larry Bradford, R-Franklin; Rep. Marge Chadderdon, R-Coeur d'Alene; Rep. Jim Clark, R-Hayden Lake; Rep. Julie Ellsworth, R-Boise; Rep. John Rusche, D-Lewiston; Rep. Ann Rydalch, R-Idaho Falls; and Rep. Leon Smith, R-Twin Falls.