

Even 60 % for community colleges a stretch

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Gov. Butch Otter has joined the people telling regions without community college services to look to Coeur d'Alene and Twin Falls for their models. They -- and Coeur d'Alene and Twin Falls -- would be smarter to look to Lewiston.

This region enjoys the benefits of a community college without suffering the drawbacks in those other regions.

What drawbacks are those? Property taxes. Lewis-Clark State College, which provides community college services as well as four-year degree programs, is financed the way the state's universities are, with its public money coming from state government's general fund. It levies no local property taxes to finance its operations, the way North Idaho College at Coeur d'Alene and the College of Southern Idaho at Twin Falls do.

That has long been a sore point at least in Twin Falls, and why shouldn't it be? Both NIC and CSI receive more state money than they once did, but nothing like LCSC.

The disparity no doubt helped spur the crusade from late House Speaker Tom Stivers, R-Twin Falls, to close or shrink LCSC. It survived the assault, but if its supporters are smart, they will stave off any future raids by endorsing a statewide system of community colleges, financed by the state, not local property taxes.

Such a system was proposed in the mid-1980s by the Idaho Task Force on Higher Education. The task force's work was financed by the Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry, but when IACI discovered its recommendations amounted to real money, it failed to support them.

Today, people in the Boise Valley and other regions think they have discovered a need not known earlier. They are wrong, but not as wrong as they will be if they think the way to new community colleges is through local property tax levies. Even if legislators followed Gov. Butch Otter's recommendation to reduce the majority needed for such a levy from 66 percent to 60 percent, a populace resentful of property tax would be unlikely to vote yes.

State funding for new colleges might seem equally improbable. But with Boise State University eager to cast off its remaining community college functions, and run with the big dogs academically as well as athletically, and with Idaho State University lobbying for a medical school, the political stars might be closer to alignment than in past years.

If any spending is an investment in the future, community college spending is. Those colleges tailor training to employer needs, and operate much more economically than universities. But telling communities already phobic about property taxes to tax themselves is no way to get them.