

Community colleges, med school hopes may be DOA

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BOISE - Two longtime goals of education advocates, creating a statewide community college system and studying a stand-alone medical school, face dim prospects in the upcoming legislative session, two lawmakers said Thursday.

After meeting five times throughout the summer, an interim committee failed to come up with a plan for creating more community colleges. Instead, the panel voted in November to recommend that the full Legislature lower the threshold for voters to approve a community college taxing district from 67 percent to 60 percent.

If the Boise metropolitan area - one of the largest in the country without a stand-alone community college - wants a community college, local counties likely will have to agree to write a ballot question asking voters to raise their property taxes to pay for the school.

"I don't think you can count on the Legislature to establish it for the citizens of the Treasure Valley," state Rep. John Rusche, D-Lewiston, said during a legislative forum organized by The Associated Press.

State Sen. John Goedde, R-Coeur d'Alene, estimated that starting a statewide community college system that could move forward plans for a Boise-area school would cost at least \$54 million.

"Our committee just couldn't find a way to ask for that much money," Goedde said.

Currently, Idaho has just two community colleges: the College of Southern Idaho in Twin Falls and North Idaho College in Coeur d'Alene. Only 45 percent of Idaho high schoolers go directly to a college - the fourth-worst rate in the nation - and some blame the relative lack of affordable options, particularly in fast-growing Boise.

Last year, Treasure Valley Community College just across the border in Ontario, Ore., was invited by the private J.A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation to create a two-year community college plan for Boise and its suburbs. The foundation also offered to donate \$15 million to the Board of Education as seed money for a Boise-area community college.

But Goedde warned against encouraging outside schools to expand into Idaho.

"My fear on relying on someone other than a government-sponsored institution is they are going to offer classes they can make money on," Goedde said. "Classes that are cost-intensive, laboratory classes, maybe in upper divisions, won't be offered."

Goedde also warned against allowing other community colleges to offer temporary classes in Boise while the Legislature and local governments mull the issue. The interim committee shot down a resolution that would help the College of Southern Idaho offer high-demand classes in Boise.

He called that plan a stopgap that could dampen voters' willingness to help pay for their own community college, but Rusche disagreed.

"While it may lessen the pressure a little, I view that as an inducement to getting the necessary voters to forming a district," he said.

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Meanwhile, both lawmakers said their colleagues in both parties will likely offer a tepid response to the state Board of Education and Idaho State University's request to study creating a state medical school.

On Wednesday, Idaho State University President Arthur Vailas asked members of a panel that doles out the state's share of a multibillion-dollar class-action tobacco settlement to spend \$300,000 on a study.

Goedde said the potential cost of building a medical school should forestall paying for the study. Most lawmakers prefer to buy more seats reserved for Idaho students in out-of-state medical schools, he said.

Each year, 18 Idaho students are admitted to the University of Washington School of Medicine in Seattle. Another eight annually attend the University of Utah School of Medicine in Salt Lake City, through a separate partnership.

He said Florida State University, which recently founded its own medical school, spent \$70 million on startup costs.

"For \$70 million, we could fund an awful lot of seats in those other programs," Goedde said.

Bob Seehusen, CEO of the Idaho Medical Association, an advocacy group for most physicians in the state, said doctors support a feasibility study that covers several options, including buying more access into other medical programs.

"No one is look a bricks-and-mortar medical school," he said. "Our intent is to look at access to medical education, whether it's something in state that Dr. Vailas is suggesting, whether it is something totally different, or whether it is expanding what we already have."