Addressing the needs of Delaware Tech

By Mark T. Brainard

In 2006, Delaware Tech made a plea to Delaware’s General Assembly, asking members to support legislation that would address our long-term capital needs. While there was no legislative solution that year and the state would soon be hit by a national recession, the college has made the best of a difficult situation in order to fulfill our mission. Thanks to one-time federal grants and stimulus funding from Gov. Markell’s Jobs Plan initiative, we’ve been able to renovate and expand in key areas like aviation maintenance, energy and nursing to address critical workforce needs.

But now, a decade later, the backlog of deferred maintenance on Delaware Tech’s 40-plus buildings has grown to a staggering $85 million. In just five years, 50 percent of our facilities will be more than 40 years old, and construction projects that would further support the needs of local business and connect Delawareans with jobs are on hold.

There is a solution. But first let me share a few additional facts.

The community college movement in the 1960s resulted in the opening of 467 community colleges nationwide, including Delaware Tech. Many of those institutions are also experiencing aging infrastructure; however, more than 70 percent of today’s 1,166 community colleges have local government support — largely through property taxes — to fund their capital needs. Unfortunately, Delaware Tech is part of the other 30 percent.

Across Delaware Tech’s four campuses, on 352 acres of land, there are more than 40 buildings consisting of 1.3 million square feet of space. Based on industry standards, we should be reinvesting $12 million per year simply to keep them safe and operable, but the annual amount we share from the Bond Bill covers only a fraction of these costs. Thus, the college’s deferred maintenance costs have more than doubled since 2006. Without a solution to our capital funding needs, those costs will rise to over $120 million by 2020 for deferred maintenance alone.

Furthermore, the building renovations we’ve undertaken over the past 12 years have resulted in extremely long completion times and increased project costs. In fact, our most recent nursing wing expansion at Stanton took 11 years to complete. Without stable and reliable funding that allows for sound decision-making, future renovation and expansion projects — if we can afford them at all — will continue to be plagued by disruptive and costly delays.

While Delaware’s public school districts and other two public institutions of higher education can raise additional capital funds through issuing bonds, referendum or endowments, Delaware Tech’s only source of revenue for capital projects is the State Bond Bill. That is why we have urged the governor and legislature to establish the Community College Infrastructure Fund (CCIF) which will enable the college to maintain our facilities and prevent a looming crisis.

“Establishing a Community College Infrastructure Fund would support over $150 million in construction projects during the next five years, a potential boon to local businesses.”

— Mark T. Brainard

This legislation, Senate Bill 137, will fund CCIF through a modest statewide property tax based on the same model as the state’s vocational school districts. The model is simple and cost-effective to implement since it would rely upon the existing county collection structure and honor all existing exemptions.

This dedicated revenue stream enables Delaware Tech’s board of trustees to issue bonds, and the college would no longer be dependent on the state’s Bond Bill — saving the state about $6 million a year. Most important, this model establishes a fair and equitable rate that does not place an unnecessary burden on homeowners.

For a home with an average market value of $196,000, the homeowner will pay less than $7.30 the first year — 2017 — and no more than $20 per year by 2022. This is a local revenue source that supports local citizens for in-demand, local jobs, and a funding model that mirrors that of the state’s school districts and over 70 percent of the community colleges throughout the country.

Establishing a Community College Infrastructure Fund would support over $150 million in construction projects during the next five years, a potential boon to local businesses. Ninety percent (over $25 million) of the work generated by the college’s recent capital projects went to Delaware contractors. And an investment in the college results in a 9 percent return to the state’s taxpayers and an 18 percent return to Delaware Tech students — 96 percent of whom are Delawareans.

For just pennies a day, the CCIF would allow the college to maintain high-tech facilities that prepare thousands of Delawareans a year to serve in the health care, IT, manufacturing, energy and law enforcement industries — just to name a few.

And when our students are trained in state-of-the-art-facilities, employers tell us they are job-ready to work in Delaware’s high-demand industries earning salaries that allow our graduates to take care of their families and give back to our communities. There’s a good chance that you or your family members are benefiting directly from the services our graduates provide.

Next year, the college will celebrate its 50th anniversary. For half a century, Delaware Tech has been a valued and trusted part of the community, and now we ask for the help and support of Delawareans and Delaware businesses so that we may provide for the next generation and beyond. Please contact your legislators and tell them you support Senate Bill 137.

For more information on the Community College Infrastructure Fund and how you can support this legislation, please visit www.dietc.edu/ccif.

Editor’s note: Mark T. Brainard is president of Delaware Technical Community College.

Your opinion counts!

The Delaware State News wants to know what you think about the issues facing our communities.

Send letters to the editor to newsroom@newszap.com. Ideally, letters should be under 300 words. Please include a phone number and local address so authors of the letters can be verified.