Tax increase would fund Delaware Tech infrastructure

MATTHEW ALBRIGHT
THE NEWS JOURNAL

Some lawmakers want to raise property taxes statewide to pay for infrastructure improvements at Delaware Technical Community College that school leaders say are sorely needed and long overdue.

Sen. Harris McDowell, who co-chairs the budget-writing Joint Finance Committee, has filed a bill that would create a new property tax. It would start in July 2017 at 15 cents per $100 of assessed property value.

Delaware Tech’s Board of Trustees could then choose to increase those taxes. It would not be able to raise the tax to more than five cents per $100 over the next five years and would be limited to a maximum of 10 cents per $100.

“This is the responsible thing for the state to do— to invest in our community college and in our economy,” McDowell said in a news release.

In addition to helping Delaware Tech, McDowell argues the construction projects funded by the tax would benefit local construction firms.

Delaware Tech has about 1.3 million square feet of space in more than 40 buildings. In five years, half those buildings will be at least 40 years old, school officials say.

The school’s deferred maintenance list— projects put off for lack of funding— adds up to almost $16 million, Braun said.

“We should be investing at least $42 million a year, just like every homeowner or building owner would, to make sure our buildings are safe and well-maintained,” he said. “If we don’t find a way to provide stable and reliable funding for our capital activities, it will quickly grow to $300 million. At some point you just can’t catch up.”

Braun said other schools, whether it’s traditional school districts, vo-tech schools or four-year colleges, have multiple ways to raise money for capital improvements. But Delaware Tech’s only way to get capital funding is to seek money in the state’s annual bond bill.

The school needed for a decade to expand its nursing facilities as the state struggled with a looming shortage of nurses, Braun argued. But the school was only able to get an expansion—not a new building, as it originally hoped for—thanks to the additional bond money.

That new nursing wing at the Bear campus opened the past school year.

Raising property taxes to fund school operations has seen its fair share of controversy over the past few months.

When the Red Clay School District voters approved a tax increase, the district faced accusations it had rigged the vote by scheduling parent engagement events the day of the referendum.

And voters have twice rejected this year the Christina School District’s request to raise property taxes to cover growing costs, which some budget cuts and layoffs are looming.

Opponents, especially senior citizens, said they couldn’t afford the increases.

Delaware Tech’s tax increase, if approved by the Legislature, wouldn’t require such votes. Vo-tech school districts can get tax increases with the Legislature’s approval.

Contact Matthew Albright at malbright@delnews.com, (302) 324-8038 or on Twitter @malbright.

Some lawmakers want to raise property taxes statewide to pay for infrastructure improvements at Delaware Technical Community College.

Click here to see this page in the eEdition: (Login Required)