

THE DAILY SENTINEL

'No college for you'

Think tank stumps for higher ed funding

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An academic and economic gem on the Western Slope stands to lose its luster if voters don't endorse a plan this fall to restore the state's ailing commitment to funding higher education in Colorado, Referendum C backers said Wednesday.

Colorado's colleges and universities have borne the brunt of the Legislature's budget cuts, a blow that threatens Mesa State's bottom line and its impact on the local economy and future workforce, Bell Policy Center analyst Spiros Protopsaltis told his audience Wednesday night at Mesa State College.

The Bell Policy Center kicked off its statewide tour Wednesday in Grand Junction to rally support for Referendum C. Members of the Denver-based public policy organization spoke with The Daily Sentinel on Wednesday afternoon.

The evening forum afforded community leaders a chance to weigh in on what they consider one of western Colorado's most valuable assets.

A combination of college payroll and direct spending by the college, students and their visitors pumped \$144 million into the local economy during fiscal year 2003-04, according to Bell Policy Center figures. Mesa State's 1,200 employees make it third largest employer in Mesa County. College services in the community employ an estimated additional 477 people.

But as more students have turned to Mesa State for an affordable and conveniently close education, money has not.

Mesa State's enrollment grew by more than 9 percent as per pupil funding fell 9 percent. State financial aid per student fell by 9 percent as well.

"We are tightening the noose around own necks," Mesa State President Tim Foster said.

The Bell Policy Center contends Mesa State and Colorado's other cash-strapped colleges and universities teeter on the breaking point so long as the state cannot afford to support a quality, accessible system of public higher education.

"These are assets that are critical to the dreams of people who grew up in these communities," Bell Policy Center president Wade Buchanan said.

Referendum C will ask voters if the state can spend an estimated \$3.1 billion over the next five years that would otherwise be refunded through sales tax refunds and tax credits.

Or, as Buchanan puts it, give the state a leg up.

“We’ve fallen and we can’t get up,” Buchanan told The Daily Sentinel.

A soft economy gave the state a shove. With the recession in the state’s rear view mirror, Buchanan said, the state still can’t get up because it can’t use the revenues now coming in to alleviate the recession’s toll on state programs and services.

Gov. Bill Owens and about two-thirds of state Democratic and GOP lawmakers support Referendum C and the companion bonding measure, Referendum D.

Republican lawmakers and other fiscal conservatives fear allowing the Legislature to spend more money would further bloat the size of state government and ensure that taxpayers never see a refund again. That’s spawned the phrase “no refund for you” among the proposal’s opponents.

In keeping with the opposition’s jingle, the Bell Policy Center decided to sum up its message with “no college for you.”

Buchanan and other Bell Policy Center staff acknowledge a tough five months ahead. That’s why they’re canvassing the state this summer to share how budget cuts have hit close to home, whether it’s the local community college or medical provider that’s reeling from slashed spending.

“We know that a think tank out of Denver ... isn’t going to convince people to vote a certain way,” Buchanan said.

It’s up to the people who hear what’s at stake for Colorado’s colleges and universities, he said, to decide if the future of higher education and overall future of the state is something they want to invest in this November.

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