

Group proposes free tuition for high school grads

Program would be funded by a bond paid back by higher income taxes paid by the better-educated, more affluent work force

By **John Darling**
for the Mail Tribune
July 22, 2008 6:00 AM

Giving qualified high school graduates two years of free tuition would be investing in the state's future, says a group of local government, business, education and nonprofit leaders.

Called the Southern Oregon Center for Community Partnerships, the group says its ambitious proposal would cost \$127 million a year and would be financed by bonds that would be repaid as the state gets more income taxes from a more educated populace.

"We need to do this or we'll keep falling further and further behind in this country," said member Michael Cavallaro, executive director of Rogue Valley Council of Governments. "Everyone — business, education, government — said it would represent their major issues."

Rep. Peter Buckley, D-Ashland, will carry the idea to the Legislature next year.

The idea behind the plan is economic development, Cavallaro said. Keeping the state in the top tier of workers with higher education would help attract corporations, jobs and revenues, something the state is increasingly falling behind on, said Cavallaro.

Oregon colleges in 1991 got 75 percent of funding from the state, with families having to make up the other 25 percent — a situation that has now shifted to 50-50, Cavallaro said.

"Families have to pay a lot more for higher education, because the government's share has gone way down and the cost of college has gone way up," said Cavallaro.

Steve Boyarsky, superintendent of Southern Oregon Education Service District in Medford and a member of the partnership, said the plan is "bold and sweeping" but vital if Oregon is to compete with China, India and other thriving countries.

The two-year scholarships would go to high-achieving students and provide a carrot for others to take that extra year of math or science and excel on state assessment tests, Boyarsky said.

"It started as an idea for economic infusion in Southern Oregon. We have decreasing enrollment because people (corporations) are not locating here. This would be an incentive to locate here because of the improving employee base," said Boyarsky.

The U.S. is alone among advanced nations in not providing major support for qualified students in higher education, said partnership member Dee Perez, director of Community Based Learning at Southern Oregon University.

"This idea is ambitious, but not unprecedented," she said. "Lots of other states are funding programs that make sure their bright, talented students stay in the state.

"Advanced nations recognize the value of keeping that edge. If we don't keep the economy going, then everyone, not just the students, will pay the price."

The local partnership, which comprises RVCOG, Southern Oregon Regional Development Inc., chambers of commerce, Rogue Community College, Southern Oregon University, the Job Council and other groups, learned that the same idea is being worked on by the Multnomah County Commission.

Buckley is "carrying the ball" on the proposal and seeing whether there's support among fellow legislators for action in the 2009 Legislature, said Cavallaro.

"We would be creating a line of revenue that's not taking money from anyone else — and it gets outside the zero sum game," said Cavallaro. "I don't know that we can do anything else but invest in the future. If you don't go beyond a high school education, everyone knows your income is severely compromised."

John Darling is a freelance writer living in Ashland. E-mail him at jdarling@jeffnet.org.