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NCCC board OK's concept for \$56 million renovation

By Kim Smith Dedam

Sep. 18 — SARANAC LAKE — Members of the North Country Community College Board unanimously approved a concept for renovation and upgrades to the Saranac Lake campus.

The \$56 million capital-improvement plan was moved forward Tuesday.

It requires approval from both Essex and Franklin county lawmakers, then State University of New York central offices in Albany and the state for inclusion in the budget.

“It’s got to follow those steps,” said Fred Smith, interim college president.

The Dormitory Authority bonds construction for the state, Smith added.

“There are no guarantees in any of this right now. And there’s no marriage to that dollar figure. All we’ve approved is an endorsement of the concept.”

The final proposal reflects input from previous discussions of renovation plans.

It cut an underground parking garage and trimmed plans for a theater into a 700-seat auditorium, resulting in a \$5 million reduction from earlier cost estimates.

The capital project would be completed in phases, said Supervisor Randy Douglas (D-Jay), who represented Essex County on the NCCC Capital Campaign Steering Committee, which unanimously approved the project — also in concept — last Friday.

“We strongly advocated for phases,” Douglas said, “because, and I can only speak for Essex County, we are also looking at possibly replacing the (Horace Nye) Nursing Home, we’re looking at a new radio system, and we still have to pay for the public-safety building.”

“The earliest you would see any construction is 2010,” Smith said. “Before we move to Phase One, we have to go back through the entire approval cycle to get bonding for each phase.”

THREE PHASES, FIVE YEARS

Phase One, to occur over the first and second years, carries a \$26.9 million total.

If approved, the state of New York would pay half of costs in each phase, with Essex and Franklin counties dividing the rest.

The roughly \$7 million each county would contribute in Phase One would be used primarily to build a student center, a new library, classroom additions and renovate the gymnasium.

Phase Two, in year three, Douglas said, with each county providing about \$3.5 million of the \$12.9 million total, would build the administration building and the new auditorium.

Capital improvements no longer include demolishing Hodson Hall, as originally proposed.

The building has garnered historic significance by the State Historic Preservation Office as the former Saranac Lake General Hospital, Douglas said, and will be preserved.

If approved, Phase Three of NCCC renovations in Saranac Lake would occur in years four and five at a cost of about \$4.3 million per county out of a total \$17.3 million.

KEEPING HODSON HALL

Phase Three continues renovations to Hodson Hall for allied health students, adds a field house and completes demolition of Clermont Hall and the boiler room. It also finishes landscaping and final road improvements.

Douglas, who helped develop the plan over the past year, said he sees it as necessary.

“Overall the project is exactly what the college needs. It will keep North Country Community College attractive and keep us competitive,” he said. “I think it is cut back to what taxpayers can afford. With that said, we strongly advocated for the phases.”

By approving funding in phases, it leaves some room should other expenditures come up, he said.

WEAK LINK

NCCC’S capital-improvement plan was in its third year of discussion when SUNY’s Rockefeller Institute of Government published a study in July looking at ways of combining strengths at NCCC and Clinton Community College.

The 37-page document found “the weak link in the facilities chain for (NCCC) is clearly its main campus in Saranac Lake. The main building is a ramshackle former hospital, tucked into a hillside. The whole campus cries out for renovation.”

Merging Clinton and North Country community colleges has been discussed before, but the colleges would have to provide impetus for such a move, the report said.

“A determined effort now at greater collaboration might help clarify within a few years whether an eventual merger would, or would not, be desirable and workable.”

Plans to collaborate with CCC are not part of the NCCC Saranac Lake campus renovation, and both colleges are currently searching for new presidents.

The complete NCCC campus-improvement proposal will be posted on the college’s Web site: www.nccc.edu.