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Task force pushes tech community college

By Maryann Mook

A community college could enroll in Corry.

Members of the Corry Industrial Roundtable think a community college in northwestern Pennsylvania is so feasible they agreed to initiate a task force to study the possibility of hosting a community college in the area.

Hoop Roche, CEO of Corry Plastics, suggested a task force initiative to roundtable members following a presentation by Steve Bishop, executive director of the Corry Higher Education Council, last week at the roundtable's quarterly meeting.

"I think a community college would be a great addition to Erie County's other fine colleges and universities and would become a feeder system for them," Bishop said.

Roche sees the area as an ideal location for a community college base because it would be accessible to several counties. He believes the Smith Education Center, where the Corry Higher Education Council operates from at 221 N. Center St., would be an ideal location for the school administrative site, with branch campuses throughout neighboring counties.

Classes would be held in locations throughout the area which have classrooms to accommodate students, such as the Corry Area School District's Career and Technical Center (former vo-tech school).

Bishop cited two recent consultant reports on economic development, one for Erie County in the Bosworth Report (2001) and one for the northwestern Pennsylvania region by the FutureWorks Report (2003), as confirming the need for a two-year community college.

Not only would a community college offer post-secondary educational opportunities for students as an alternative to a four-year college, but it would offer educational programs that could provide a skilled work force for manufacturing, plus boost the economy, Roche said.

"It's become an attractive project," Roche said. "Students could get an education and live at home. We could end up educating kids who would not otherwise get a two-year degree."

Roche added that people who teach at two-year colleges buy homes and spend money, which would help the local economy.

Corry's initiative is in line with the Joint Operating Committee of the Erie County Technical School, which is spearheading an effort to create a multi-county community college for northwestern Pennsylvania. Aldo Jackson, director of the Erie County Technical School, has been coordinating the community college activities.

"This is a multicounty effort involving directors of career and technical centers from school districts in Warren, Crawford, Venango, Mercer and Clarion counties," Bishop said.

The Joint Operating Committee consists of one school board member from each of the 11 school districts that send students to Erie County Technical School in Summit Township. The committee represents all Erie County school districts, including the Union City Area School District, except for Corry and the city of Erie, which run their own vocational/technical programs.

The committee in April approved a resolution in support of a technical community college for northwest Pennsylvania.

Judy Sharer, director of the Corry Area School District's Career and Technical Center, has also been involved in the community college discussion with Jackson.

"This community college will be an excellent opportunity for our students to receive accredited training locally at the career and technical center and the Corry Higher Education Council building," Sharer said.

Corry's Career and Technical Center has offered adult vocational/technical classes but not for college credit, Sharer said.

In a recent response to a questionnaire by the Manufacturer's Association of Northwest Pennsylvania, Jackson said a complete list of programs at the community college is yet to be determined.

He stated the programs should meet regional and local needs, such as in the fields of healthcare, manufacturing, transportation and construction.

There would be no need to "build a campus," according to Jackson, because each career and technical center would serve as a branch campus, with laboratories, classrooms, fixtures and equipment already in place. He noted that the career and technical centers would double as college classrooms and laboratories, and any improvements made for the post-secondary programs will be available to high school students.

Jackson and some of the career and technical centers directors met recently with Mike Batchelor, president of the Erie Community Foundation, to discuss if the foundation would be interested in helping fund the planning effort for a community college, Bishop said. He told the roundtable the foundation has expressed interest and has asked for some more information and has invited Jackson to put a grant application together.

"If such a grant is approved, and if a community college were to become reality, it would likely take up to three years to complete the planning process, receive approvals and get the project to the point where a community college were in operation," Bishop said.

Bishop cited three major advantages of a community college:

- Cost to the student, who pays only one-third of the tuition.
- The sponsoring municipality (either the county or school district of the individual's residence) pays one-third and the state pays one-third.
- The potential to create educational programs that are not currently offered by existing post-secondary schools, or even programs that could duplicate existing programs but at a much lower cost to students.
 - Community college credits are transferable, so students could transfer those credits to an area college or university toward a bachelor's degree.

"It's important that if it's going to be done, that it's done right, and that northwest Pennsylvania creates a first-class community college that we can be proud of," Bishop said. "I think we're worth the investment and to not do so relegates us to permanent second-class status as a region."

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