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Steps toward new college

Leaders say school would fill gaps in Erie County

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By [George Miller](#)
george.miller@timesnews.com

Erie County government and Erie schools officials are taking steps toward the possible creation of a community college.

"It's something Erie County needs, and northwest Pennsylvania needs," said County Executive Mark DiVecchio. "Everyone we've talked to is excited about it. (Businesses) just think that is what is lacking in Erie County now."

DiVecchio joined other county leaders and Erie School District officials on a recent trip to the Lehigh Carbon Community College near Allentown. They came away impressed.

"It's really an unbelievable program," said Sean D. Wiley, the county's director of administration.

But Wiley said many questions must be answered about the creation of a community college in the Erie area, including types of programs that would be offered.

The state now has 14 community colleges, which are two-year institutions that offer associate's degrees, work-force development programs, vocational training and other courses.

"It's a great concept," Wiley said. "We really need to investigate and see if it makes sense. It's really in the beginning stages of getting this thing mapped out."

DiVecchio said he and other county officials will be going to Bidwell Training Center in Pittsburgh on Monday to get a look at its skills-training programs.

He said the Erie community college's programs would be based on the needs of local businesses.

"We can direct the curriculum for what we need in northwestern Pennsylvania -- welding, medical, manufacturing," he said.

DiVecchio said the community college also would help existing four-year colleges and universities in the area because many students would want to go there after getting a two-year degree.

Some of the county's questions about the formation of a community college could be answered Nov. 30.

That's when Sandi Vito, deputy secretary for work-force development for the state Department of Labor and Industry, is expected to be in Erie with a consultant on community colleges.

The Erie Community Foundation, which is considering paying for part of the community college study, will host Vito and the consultant.

"It's fact-finding and exploratory to find out from the expert what can and cannot be done," said

Michael Batchelor, the foundation's president.

"My board -- a lot of people are interested. We would like to know what the options are. It's too early to tell what we should do."

Boost to economy

DiVecchio, Batchelor and others pointed to a 2001 study by consultant Brian Bosworth that said a community college is one of the critical elements for the economic development in the region.

County Councilman Fiore Leone, who was among those who traveled to Lehigh Carbon Community College, raved about it.

He said a community college would help economic development by providing a skilled work force for employers and educational opportunities for residents.

Jake Rouch, chief executive of the Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership, said a community college "is one of the top issues with our members and the business community. I would say their trip was right on target."

A community college "is a competitive advantage" over the long term, he said.

Rouch said a community college can be full-service or purely a technical college that doesn't offer programs for white-collar jobs.

"There are a wide array of options," he said.

Lehigh Carbon Community College is on a 150-acre campus in Schnecksville, a few miles from Allentown. Established in 1966, it was sponsored by 13 school districts in Lehigh and Carbon counties. It also offers classes at several other community locations, including Allentown.

The college, which has about 7,000 students, offers more than 100 programs that lead to two-year degrees and also has non-credit courses geared to businesses for work-force training.

It has a \$30 million operating budget, of which \$12.5 million comes from the state, \$3.5 million from the sponsoring school districts and the rest from tuition, businesses and other sources, school officials said.

Of the state's 14 community colleges, four are sponsored by school districts and 10 by counties, according to the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges. Commission officials could not be reached Friday.

DiVecchio said he will ask Crawford and Warren counties if they want to be part of the study for the community college.

Filling needs

Erie school officials on the Allentown trip were Erie School Board President Rebecca Martin, board member Ed Brzezinski and Erie schools Superintendent James Barker.

Martin said the community college would increase educational opportunities in the area.

"The county is taking the initiative to move it forward," Martin said. "We do think there is a place for a community college in Erie, Pa. I think if we move this forward, we are saying we are continuing to grow to meet the needs of business and industry in this region."

Wiley, the county's director of administration, said the county will meet with existing educational providers to discuss gaps in programs and how they can be filled.

"We don't want to duplicate anything," he said. "The key is to make it affordable and complement what we have."

The tuition for a full-time student at Lehigh Carbon Community College is about \$1,250 per semester, county officials said.

The college could cost millions of dollars to start, though county officials have not progressed far enough to determine a price tag, Wiley said. Money would likely be available from the state, businesses and others to help offset costs.

The county in the early 1990s sponsored a community college, the Northwestern Pennsylvania Technical Institute. It was known as the "school without walls" because it contracted for training its students with local educational providers.

The school, which later became CAMtech, went into bankruptcy in late 2003 after the state reported it was owed \$16 million in reimbursements.

CAMtech's assets were purchased by Erie businessman Rick Griffith, who has said he plans to open the school as a for-profit facility at the former Blair building at the Millcreek Mall as early as April.

Wiley said the county must look at the problems that were associated with NPTI and avoid duplicating them.

DiVecchio said he is hoping a study to form a community college could get under way in 2007.

"I would hope within the next three years something would be in place," he said.

GEORGE MILLER can be reached at 870-1724 or by e-mail.

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