

Group pushes community college in I.F.

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Mario Hernandez, co-chairman of Citizens for Affordable Higher Education, talks about the benefits of making Eastern Idaho Technical College into a community college at a Tuesday morning news conference at the technical college. The group needs 1,000 signatures on its petition to put the measure on the May election ballot. Taylor Carpenter / tcarpenter@postregister.com

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The question of whether to turn Eastern Idaho Technical College into a community college is likely headed to the May ballot.

The effort is being led by Citizens for Affordable Higher Education, which is headed by chairmen Mario Hernandez, owner of Teton Toyota, Doug Crabtree, CEO of Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center, and John Liljenquist, founder of the Rocky Mountain Diabetes Clinic.

The group gathered in front of EITC on Tuesday afternoon and spoke of the region's need for affordable post-secondary education.

"A student who goes to the College of Eastern Idaho will save 20 to 60 percent over the regional options for the first two years of their higher education," Hernandez said. "A community college will also add, by year six, \$66 million to local economic activities and sustain 900 local jobs."

Community colleges generally require a high school diploma or GED to attend. They offer students the ability to pursue associate degrees at lower tuition rates than four-year universities; credits also are transferable to four-year universities.

The group must collect 1,000 signatures by early 2017 to bring the issue to ballot and allow voters to decide whether they want to create a community college taxing district. Bonneville County is the group's proposed taxing district.

Group members already are approaching 1,000 signatures gathered, spokesman Steve Taggart said. He expects the signatures to be ready by January.

After student tuition fees, funds from liquor taxes and \$5 million pledged by the Legislature, a community college would cost about \$800,000 to create, according to an economic impact study released in August.

Based on average home prices including tax exemptions, Bonneville County residents would pay \$13.37 per year toward a community college, according to the Citizens for Affordable Higher Education.

That contribution, group members say, is small compared to the benefits it would bring to the region.

A community college would bolster a dwindling talent pipeline for local businesses, said group member Park Price.

"I was just talking with someone who was saying we're at capacity here, and companies would like to expand but they can't find the people," he said. "The community college is a tremendous answer for that. It will expand the tax base and lower everybody's burden, but most important it makes a difference for kids."

A ballot initiative requesting the formation of a community college taxing district will need a super majority, or 66.67 percent approval, to pass.

Prior efforts to create a community college in eastern Idaho failed; the issue most recently went to ballot in 1991.

Group members are optimistic, however, that higher population density and existing infrastructure at EITC will improve chances to reach super majority approval.

“I think the biggest thing is the fact that the facility already exists, and it doesn’t require expansion or capital funds for improvement. I think that was the big issue in the past,” Ammon Mayor Dana Kirkham said.

If the initiative passes, other counties will have the option to opt into the taxing district with a simple majority approval. If counties don’t opt in, they will pay a small fee for their residents who attend the community college.