

WPCC in the red, seeks county's help

By JOHN McNAMARA
News Herald Staff Writer

Unanticipated expenses and years of underbudgeting reached a breaking point recently as Western Piedmont Community College announced it was \$80,000 in the hole going into the end of the fiscal year.

"I think we do a pretty good job managing this institution," WPCC President Jim Richardson told the commission Tuesday night. "I hated to come here tonight and request this."

Richardson, along with college finance officer Ken Clark and WPCC Board of Trustees Vice Chairman Charles Taylor requested the Burke County Board of Com-

missioners to allocate \$80,000 to the college's current budget to cover the deficit.

Richardson said shortfall was caused by several unexpected factors — \$20,000 for utilities on the business technology building currently under construction, \$32,000 in legal fees from the lawsuit against architect Robert Salsbury over the Phifer Building and \$20,000 to replace a failing air conditioning system. The remaining money, he said, would go toward routine items such as housekeeping and office supplies.

Although the college won its lawsuit, and was awarded more than \$400,000, Richardson said all that money would go toward repairing the damage. In addition, he said, the college could not recover attorney's fees from

the defendant.

"The money spent at Western Piedmont is not been spent on frills. It never has," Taylor said. "We are asking you to help us stay solvent. By law, the state community college board could close our doors if we run a deficit. We are not asking for money we've wasted. We're asking you for what we need."

The WPCC representatives pointed out the college had received only small increase in operating expense from the county every year, including no increase during the current fiscal year. Richardson said WPCC received, on the average, 30 percent less in county funding than the other 57 schools in the community college system.

A large reason for the deficit, the college

delegation said, was that the county would not budget extra money to cover maintenance needs, forcing the school to scramble through its budget as needs arose. Richardson said the school scraped together \$23,000 to repair the tennis courts this fiscal year, another unexpected expense that drained the college's small reserves.

Richardson rejected a suggestion from Commission Chairman Jimmy Jacumin that the college go to its foundation to get the necessary funds.

"The foundation exists for scholarships, not current operating expense," he said. "Folks don't like to give money to legal fees."

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We can go out and ask for money for scholarships and maybe brick and mortar, but not this."

Jacumin also suggested the college needed to take a harder look at increasing efficiencies at the institution, such as using prison labor for yard work and maintenance and combining its maintenance depart-

ment with the school system.

"Anytime you create efficiencies you save dollars that could be put toward things like this," Jacumin said.

"We have tried to create all the efficiencies we can," Clark said, "but efficiencies only go so far. Then you have to pay the bills."

The commission is expected to act on the request at a regular meet-

ing before the end of the fiscal year, June 30. County Assistant Manager/Finance Officer Paul Ijames told the commission that because of an increase in current year property tax receipts, the county had the money to cover the college's shortfall.

WPCC officials also promised to look to other sources to raise some of the needed funds.