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Bond would give WPCC $5.3 million

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If voters pass a $3.1 billion bond proposal in November, Western Piedmont Community College could receive more than $5.3 million for capital improvements, according to figures just released by the General Assembly.

Thursday Gov. Jim Hunt signed the bond-referendum proposal, also known as the Michael K. Hooker Higher Education Facilities Finance Act, for a statewide vote on critical construction needs to North Carolina's public universities and community colleges.

"(The bond) will help make long overdue repairs and upgrades that are critical to keeping our universities and community colleges strong," Gov. Hunt said in a recent press release to The News Herald. "I will work closely with legislative, business, university and community university college leaders to make sure this referendum passes in November."

On May 18, the proposal received overwhelming support from both Democrats and Republicans in the General Assembly. The Senate unanimously approved the proposal. The House approved the proposal with a 112 to 1 vote. Rep. Milton "Toby" Fitch, Jr., D-Edgecombe, Nash and Wilson, voted against the proposal.

Rep. Fitch did not return a phone call to The News Herald in response to his dissenting vote by presstime.

If approved by voters, it would be the largest single borrowing package in the state's history. The proposal would give $2.5 billion to the 16 University of North Carolina campuses and $600 million to the state's 58 community colleges.

Of that allotment, WPCC would get more than $5.3 million - $1.5 for repairs and renovations, and approximately $3.8 for new construction needs.

"We desperately need this bond," said WPCC Vice-President for Administrative Affairs Malone McNeely.

McNeely also said the local community college is already two year's behind in addressing repair and renovation needs, largely due to the lack of appropriate funding.

If the bond passes on the November ballot, WPCC would automatically receive $1.5 million, which would be used for the following repairs and renovations:

•Upgrades to WPCC's heating and cooling systems.

•Installing more energy efficient lighting and upgrading the lighting

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in one
campus parking lot.

•Repair sidewalks and handrails

•Reinforce roads and parking lots (fix cracks and surface erosion)

•Repair roofs to four buildings and to the Phifer Learning Resources Center

In terms of new construction needs, WPCC is eligible to draw an estimated $3.8 million, which includes a local match from county commissioners of $0.69 for every dollar in state funds.

McNeely said WPCC would like to use these funds to construct a new child care center, a new health science building, an engineering technology building and a continuing education outdoor shelter.

"Too many of our students are training for 21st-century jobs in outdated classrooms, with outdated technology," said Senate President Pro Tempore Marc Basnight in a recent news release. "We simply cannot expect to compete for the best professors and the brightest students if our facilities are not competitive with other public universities."

North Carolina's 58 community colleges face both increased enrollment growth— up to 15,000 new students over the next five years— and more than $1.4 billion in building needs.

State Treasurer Harlan Boyles recently told legislators the state could afford to pay off the bonds without a tax increase.

According to lawmakers, the bonds would be issued over five years and paid back in about 20 years. During fiscal year 2006-2007, the peak of the payment period, lawmakers would have to set aside $342 million to repay the bonds.

Also in that fiscal year, $718 million would go to pay off the state's debts in regards to other bond issues.

A similar proposal last year died in the Legislature because it did not call for a public vote.