

Officials view WPCC's facility repair needs

By SABIAN WARREN

News Herald Staff Writer

At Western Piedmont Community College, concrete panels on an exterior wall of Patton Hall, weakened by water damage, have noticeably shifted out of place, causing officials to worry the panels could collapse and result in injury or worse.

The wall is only one example of the many facility repairs needed at Western Piedmont, officials say, but help may be on the way.

The General Assembly is considering a major bond package to fund improvements at the state's 16 university system schools and 58 community colleges.

Jim Burnett, Western Piedmont's vice president for academic affairs, played host

to state Senators Steve Metcalf and Charles Carter on Friday, taking the legislators from Asheville on a tour of the campus to point out renovation priorities.

Carter said the Senate is committed to providing the funding needed to keep North Carolina's aging community colleges competitive with those in other states.

"The needs are immediate," said Carter. "We have buildings that are very old and equipment that's old. Our students aren't getting what they need."

He added, "We can't wait any longer. Every year we wait is another 5 percent on the cost of construction."

The final amount of the bond package hasn't been determined. The Senate has approved a \$3 billion plan, which would include \$300 million for community col-

leges. The Senate plan calls for issuing special obligation bonds, Metcalf said. Such bonds would not require a public referendum.

House members late last week were still debating how to proceed, with bond proposals changing frequently in intensive negotiations. It appears now that House members will vote this week on a plan that calls for a \$1.2 billion bond issue, with \$1 billion going to the universities and \$200 million for community colleges.

A key difference is that the House plan would require a public vote. Under one proposal, a referendum would be held in May of 2000 at the same time as statewide primaries for president, governor and council of state seats.

Once the House votes, representatives

from both chambers will likely then meet and work out a compromise.

"We're glad for the attention we're getting on the problems we have," Burnett said.

He pointed out that Patton Hall and Moore Hall are both more than 30 years old.

"Any building you have is going to start showing some wear and tear after that period of time," Burnett said.

Besides the work needed on Patton Hall, renovations targeted across the campus range from painting to repaving and roof repairs, Burnett said.

The college also wants to build a new facility that would house an early childhood development and education program, a diagnostic center for children, and health sciences programs, he said.

The state's community colleges are

expected to receive special funding from another source, Metcalf said. House Bill 275, which has already passed in the House and Senate, would provide \$142 million for the system's most pressing equipment and technology needs. The bill only needs the signature of Gov. Jim Hunt to become law, which officials said is expected to happen soon.

A higher level of funding for community colleges was also approved in the state's regular budget process, as legislators on both sides of the aisle recognized the need for shoring up the community college system, officials said.

Western Piedmont, established in 1968, today has 2,500 curriculum students and another 9,500 students in continuing education classes, Burnett said.