

College, county wrestle over funds

Western Piedmont Community College says Burke County contracted to pay for upkeep on new continuing education center, \$140,000 needed before the building can open. Commissioners say despite agreement, the county cupboard is bare.

By SHARON McBRAYER
The News Herald

MORGANTON — Officials with Western Piedmont Community College told Burke County Board of Commissioners that its newest building will not open without more money.

The college needs an influx of cash, which college officials say the county is obligated to provide, in order to open the 25,000-square-foot continuing education complex. The building houses classrooms, offices and laboratory space. But it appears the doors of the building remain locked.

Although the county kicked in a little more than \$2 million for the construction of the building, according to college officials, the county is responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of the building, as well. But county officials say the coffers are dry.

According to a North Carolina General Statute governing community colleges, the county is bound to provide adequate funds to meet utilities, maintenance and repairs, as well as salaries of janitors, security guards, motor vehicles and even janitorial supplies to local campuses.

WPCC Vice President Cyndie Calloway told commissioners Friday that state money is used for instruction and county money is used for upkeep and the two pots of money cannot be mixed.

She said the state can withhold its funding if there is not adequate funding from the county, which could ultimately mean the college would have to close.

Not only does a general statute spell out the county's obligations, but the county has a contract with the college, signed in April 2002, by the county finance director, which says, in part, "I hereby certify that the county will support

Dr. Jim Richardson, president of WPCC, said after the special meeting held Friday, that the situation is a Catch-22. He said commissioners want to bring industry here, but the college cannot train them if it does not have the funds to open the building. And if the college cannot train workers, then industry is not going to come to the county.

this project for operation and maintenance costs...."

But the building is about more than just money for college officials, they say.

Jim Burnette, another vice president, recently told commissioners that WPCC has been at the forefront of work force and economic development for almost 40 years. But because the college has not been able to open the new building, many classes that were promised to students have had to be trimmed and some training for industry has had to be put on hold.

"If the center is not open, the college is going to continue to struggle to find space for the training," Burnette said.

At a time when county officials are struggling to bring new industry to the area, college officials believe the opening of the building is crucial to attracting new industry.

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College trustee Juleigh Sitton compared the situation to buying new sheriff's cars, but not providing money to put gas in

them.

After hearing from staff and WPCC board trustees, Commission Chairman Tom Johnson told the group that he appreciates the job that WPCC and its trustees does in the community.

But Johnson told them, "Our situation is not a made-up situation. We're in a bad situation."

The college says it needs

\$140,000. Johnson said commissioners would review WPCC's request, but told them the county cannot come up with \$140,000.

County attorney Dan Kuehnert said, legally, it is the county's responsibility to come up with the money, but coming up with the money might mean making cuts in county departments.

Commissioner Maynard Taylor said the only way to get through the situation is by the county and college to work together to find another source of revenue.

"I'm talking about, you can't get blood out of a turnip," Taylor said. "We don't (even) have a turnip."