

A community panel

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Park Price, chairman of the Community College Citizen Study Panel, is leading an 11-person discussion on how a community college would affect eastern Idaho. Eastern Idaho Technical College, in the background, would likely be the site of the community college if a conversion is approved by a supermajority vote. Pat Sutphin /psutphin@postregister.com



Park Price is chairman of the 11-person Community College Citizen Study Panel. The panel, featuring people from various sectors of the community, will review research regarding the economic effects of a community college. (Pat Sutphin)

By KEVIN TREVELLYAN
ktrevellyan@postregister.com

What do a banker, former legislator, media consultant, farmer and senior class president have in common?

They're all trying to find out how a community college would affect eastern Idaho.

The Community College Citizen Study Panel, announced in February, was put together by Idaho Falls Mayor Rebecca Casper, Ammon Mayor Dana Kirkham and Bonneville County Commissioner Dave Radford. Its purpose is to answer questions posed by the possibility of a community college.

What would need to happen? What would it cost? Does the region need it?

Park Price, Bank of Idaho chairman, is also the panel's chairman.

"We don't have any dogs in the fight. We really want to understand the benefits and costs of a community college, and make sure that when we issue our report, it's as balanced and accurate as possible," Price said.

The 11-person panel is independent of any city committees, and isn't tasked with coming to a specific conclusion.

The panel was born out of an informal group that included Casper, Kirkham, Radford and others, including officials from Idaho Falls School District 91 and Bonneville Joint School District 93, Idaho State University, Brigham Young University-Idaho and Idaho National Laboratory.

"It was a group of folks with an interest in higher education," Casper said. "With that group, over time, we got to the point where we realized that all talk, no action wasn't going to do much. When we had our last gathering last year, we brainstormed names and profile types."

The panel, which has met once so far, was designed to represent a variety of perspectives. It also includes representatives from Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center and INL, a community activist, a small business owner and others.

"Everybody has different views, and this is a very important region-wide project," Price said. "We want to be sure that everyone has the opportunity to weigh in and give us different perspectives because that's how we get the best answers possible. I think there's enough diversity here that we should be able to get all the relevant questions raised during our time."

The panel will rely on new research when it deliberates those relevant questions.

INL and REDI, eastern Idaho's regional economic development firm, donated \$20,000 and \$25,000 to the panel, respectively, when it was announced. The vast majority of that money will go toward a study to be conducted by the Research and Business Development Center in Rexburg.

"We want to know where the students would come from, how it would improve what's available now over the current technical curriculum at Eastern Idaho Technical College," Price said. "And we're interested in knowing what qualifications employers around here are looking for. We've got good info from INL, but we're trying to see how their needs compare to others in the region."

The BYU-I-affiliated research center, formed by a 2014 merger between the Eastern Idaho Entrepreneurial Center and the Southeast Idaho Research Institute, has done economic analysis for INL, the Museum of Idaho and Melaleuca, along with other clients.

It'll conduct research on an initial set of 13 questions provided by the panel. As the panel continues its investigation, it will formulate new questions for the center to explore.

The center's initial data will be mostly qualitative. Ideally, it will provide the panel a better sense for which demographics a new community college would attract.

“We’re looking at operating costs, payroll, salaries, funding and enrollment counts associated with other colleges,” said Will Jenson, the center’s director of business. “With the ultimate goal of finding how much student enrollment they could expect in eastern Idaho, and the costs associated.”

When the panel gets a better sense of a hypothetical eastern Idaho community college student body, it can create a more accurate picture of what a potential taxing district should look like, if the conversion makes it to ballot.

For an Idaho Falls-based community college to become reality, a supermajority of voters from within a proposed taxing district would have to approve its funding.

Demographic information may also provide a foundation for cost estimates for the changes EITC would need to make to support the additional stress on its resources.

“A lot of this background research we’re doing is helping us get some parameters to what the size and cost structure would be for a community college in eastern Idaho,” Jenson said. “Once we have all of those figures dialed in, we can take a scientific approach to enrollment sizes and growth over the next five years.”

From there, the center will provide economic analysis of how a community college would interact with the private sector.

“The number of jobs it would create or sustain, labor impact in the area, and ripple affects that come from a community college operation,” Jenson said. “Those are the things we capture.”

Though there’s no set schedule. The panel will meet on a monthly basis, for the most part.

The research and deliberation process is expected to continue until June, when the panel’s final report is due, along with its decision on what role a community college would play in eastern Idaho’s economy.

“We want to be sure that we’ll have done all our research, and left no area unexplored,” Price said.

Community College Citizen Study Panel members

- Nicole Christensen, parent and advocate of education innovation.
- Doug Crabtree, CEO, Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center.
- Marisa Hoover, senior class president, Hillcrest High School.
- Amy Lientz, Idaho National Laboratory.
- Dave Lent, Idaho Falls School District 91 Trustee.
- Stephanie Mickelsen, Idaho Farm Bureau Federation.
- Sheila Olsen, community activist.
- Park Price, Bank of Idaho.
- Oscar Rojas, media consultant, KIFI.
- Ann Rydalch, former legislator, energy advocate, Bonneville County Heritage Association.
- Ken Taylor, certified public accountant, small business owner.