

Otter signs community college bill

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Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter on Tuesday signed a bill paving the way for a community college in eastern Idaho. The state is expected to offer \$5 million to support the effort.

By BRYAN CLARK

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BOISE — Idaho Falls is one step closer to having a community college.

Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter on Tuesday signed a bill that will create an account to hold \$5 million, which would go toward transitioning Eastern Idaho Technical College into a two-year community college.

Otter told those gathered for the signing that there are some bills he would like to sign "with an exclamation mark."

"There's only so many portals available for getting ahead in life, but the more of those we can make, the better workforce we're going to develop, the better citizenry we're going to develop," Otter said.

The signing ceremony included senators and representatives from the Idaho Falls area, along with state higher education and economic development representatives.

Rep. Wendy Horman, R-Idaho Falls, said she hopes area voters will see the state's commitment to a community college and support the idea.

"We're hopeful that the citizens of eastern Idaho agree that a community college in the Idaho Falls area would be a great thing both for our students and for our economy," she said.

Rep. Julie VanOrden, R-Pingree, echoed those sentiments.

“This is a great opportunity for our community and our region. I see so many opportunities for our students,” she said.

From here, all eyes shift to the local effort to develop support for a proposed college. It will require a two-thirds vote of all voters within a new taxing district. The boundaries of that district have yet to be defined.

Otter said the effort to establish the College of Western Idaho should be a lesson to eastern Idaho voters. The proposal for the college passed narrowly but the school has since grown at a breakneck pace.

“Even though it was a hurdle that was tough to get over, we convinced people by over two-thirds that they needed it. And they responded accordingly,” he said.

The actual \$5 million appropriation hasn’t yet been made. The bill Otter signed merely creates the account into which those funds will be transferred. Funding is expected to be included in some of the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee’s end-of-the-year budget bills, which likely will be debated in the next two days.

Local community college backers hope those dollars will show voters the state is serious about supporting the effort.

“If, once the facts and data are known, the voters of our area choose to create a community college to serve eastern Idaho, it will be extremely helpful to have access to these state dollars to help establish the new school,” Idaho Falls Mayor Rebecca Casper said.

Idaho Falls Councilman John Radford agreed that the \$5 million will lend the effort credibility.

“If the governor is behind us, it looks like we aren’t just shooting in the dark,” he said.