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Monday, March 3, 2008

Building blitz to boost colleges

Governor pushes \$1B for projects, creating jobs

Marisa Schultz / The Detroit News

YPSILANTI – After a funding dry spell, the state is gearing up for the largest higher education building boom ever in an effort to kick-start the economy and replace some deteriorating campus buildings.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm has recommended nearly \$1 billion in construction projects at 10 universities and 15 community colleges, including a biology building at University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, a biomedical research building at Wayne State University and expansion of the engineering and plant sciences buildings at Michigan State University.

Eastern Michigan University, which has waited the longest among the universities for a state-supported project, made the governor's list, with a planned makeover of its outdated Pray-Harrod classroom building.

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"It's huge for us," said Freman Hendrix, chief government relations officer at EMU. "To have gone now a dozen years since having a project funded by the state -- you can understand why we are pleased."

But not all colleges are celebrating.

Western Michigan University's proposal to renovate Sangren Hall was turned down. So was Oakland University's Human Health Building. Ferris State University's plea to create a new home for its Michigan College of Optometry went unanswered again.

"Frankly, as a college we are sort of overlooked, tucked away in sleepy Big Rapids away from the fast-moving area of the state," said Dr. Kevin Alexander, dean of the Michigan College of Optometry and president of the American

Optometric Association. "But we provide 60 percent of optometrists in the state, and it's getting even higher."

Ferris has one of 16 optometry schools in the country, but the college is housed in an old dorm beset by asbestos and leaky pipes, Alexander said.

"I've been to every school, and this is the worst and most decrepit optometry facility in the country, period," he said.

The last time any college received construction money from Lansing was in 2005, and some -- like EMU -- have been waiting since the 1990s.

List of projects studied

Since there's not enough money for every college to get a project, the governor was careful when she reviewed each college's wish list, said Leslee Fritz, spokeswoman for the state budget office.

"The decision was made to look at projects that were most directly connected to the core mission of that university and to the needs the Michigan economy has," Fritz said. "Those kinds of factors were taken in consideration and that resulted in the projects we ended up with."

Now the governor's recommendation sits with the joint capital outlay subcommittee in Lansing. Lawmakers there have been mulling over the proposal and whether the right projects are on the list.

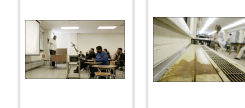
"I think there are some we need to add in, but that also will take away from someone else," said Rep. Morris W. Hood III,

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EMU history professor Joseph Engwenyu teaches in the Pray- Harrod building, which is set to get a makeover. (Ankur Dholakia / The Detroit News)

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chairman of the subcommittee.

The issue is the bond cap.

Bonds through the State Building Authority pay for the state's share of the building projects -- 50 percent of the cost for community college and 75 percent for universities -- but only up to \$40 million per project.

There's a limit on how much money the state building authority can bond out. The available capacity is \$643.5 million. The governor's higher education recommendation, coupled with other state agency projects, falls under that cap at \$561.8 million, leaving little room for other projects.

Rochelle A. Black, director of government relations at Oakland University, believes the schools that didn't get a project in 2005 should have first priority this year. In 2006, Granholm proposed funding those colleges, but that bill -- which included Oakland -- was ultimately vetoed.

"Why can't we go back to those five universities and those 14 community colleges that were caught up in the fiscal crisis and vetoed? That would be the fairest and cleanest way to get that done," Black said. Once those projects are funded, then the leftover money can be divided up for remaining colleges in another budget bill, she suggested.

EMU building dreary

It's important for the Legislature to settle on the projects soon to give the state's economy a much-needed shot in the arm by creating hundreds of construction-related jobs, said Hood, D-Detroit.

"It's a stimulus package," Hood said. "We are trying to spur the economy, get those jobs going and invest in our kids that we want to keep here instead of losing them to other states."

And at Eastern Michigan, students and faculty say they are in dire need of that money.

Pray-Harold is the largest classroom building on campus, but it hasn't received much of a face-lift since it opened in 1969.

"It's just older and dirtier overall," said EMU junior Courtney Small of Adrian, who was sitting on a hallway bench with her laptop on a recent afternoon. "Maybe it's because I'm from a small town. But I'm just not used to this sort of grunge."

The building has few lounging areas for students. Classrooms have old wooden desks with the attached chairs that leave little room for a notebook, let alone a laptop. And there are few technological amenities, students say.

"It could use another computer lab," said Heather McIntosh, an EMU student from Melvindale, who often uses the newer library or student center because they're more welcoming. "It would be nice if we could be more comfortable and just stay here," she said.

Classrooms are known to get terribly hot. "Virtually all Eastern students use this building, and it's not what it should be in terms of a learning environment," EMU history professor Mark Higbee said. "You shouldn't come to a class and have to sit in sweat."

Debt payoff delayed

Assuming the Legislature passes a building project bill, the state won't have to begin paying off the debt for a few years, depending on when each college breaks ground, Fritz said. The state pays \$232 million annually in debt for previous state building projects. Officials haven't estimated the future amount of annual payments, since other projects may be paid off by that point, she said.

Granholm's proposal comes at a time of growing pessimism in Michigan as to whether the state will have the money to repay the bonds in the future, said Bill Ballenger, publisher of the political newsletter "Inside Michigan Politics." The fear is if the debt becomes unmanageable, other state programs may be shortchanged, he said.

"But if you think there is a reasonable argument to be made for more bonding, I think higher education infrastructure is one of the best areas you could invest in," Ballenger said. "There's no question they need help, and they have needed it for a long time."

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- [Elections](#)
- [Religion](#)
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- [Metro/State](#)
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- [Oakland](#)
- [Macomb](#)
- [Livingston](#)
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