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EDITORIAL

UW Fox project, timing wrong for county taxpayers

The University of Wisconsin-Fox Valley's existing theater-auditorium-lecture hall-and-former-mini-gym is outdated.

But the UW-System has done little to market its two-year schools.

Built in 1962, it's small, out of ADA compliance and relies on more than 200 folding chairs and temporary risers.

You can hold a class in it or stage a small play. But everyone pretty much agrees it's the educational equivalent to grandpa's horn-rimmed glasses.

It should, somehow, be upgraded or replaced so students that rely on it get a larger, flexible lecture hall.

But the two-year UW college's proposal for a \$13.9 million "Communication Arts Center" replacement - reliant on \$5.3 million each from Winnebago and Outagamie counties and far less state and private cash - is back on the table at the wrong time.

Wrong because of higher-ed's and local governments' current fiscal jams. Wrong because of more-pressing to-do lists local taxpayers need addressed. And wrong because of the questions being asked about the role our two-year colleges play in this high-tech era.

On Tuesday, the Winnebago County Board of Supervisors hears UW-Fox Valley's pitch for the auditorium-and-theater addition to the Menasha campus. Just information. No action planned.

The supervisors will be reminded of the Outagamie County Board's vote to kick in its \$5.3 million share. The supervisors will be reminded of a 1959 agreement requiring both counties to fund the school's bricks-and-mortar improvements. They'll be reminded of a "responsibility to a liberal arts education," or something like that.

Fair points.

But 2006 is not 1959. There's a need to reexamine the two counties' UW-Fox Valley promise in a 21st Century educational landscape.

The UW-System's two-year colleges were founded to provide a two-year launch pad into four-year college. Students amass a foundation of credits and "try out" higher education before moving on.

While the colleges' missions have evolved, the public understanding of them is slower to.

That's the first two-year college project to address: Public perception.

Should we be building \$13.9 million communication arts centers at our two-year schools?

UW-Fox Valley boasts more than 1,700 students. It's the educational home for an increasingly diverse student population. It is incorporating more distance learning technology. It's evolving for the better.

But the UW-System has done little to market its two-year schools. Many folks still know little about them or stereotype them as second-tier fallbacks.

The good people who run UW-Fox Valley are the first to educate and destroy the myths.

The problem is a \$13.9 million Communication Arts Center proposal isn't the vehicle to do it with.

Oshkosh taxpayers seem ready to consider and, possibly, support a plan to reshuffle their school district and build and remodel schools. Whatever comes forward in the next one to two years will cost millions.

Winnebago County government requires a fiscal house cleaning, not new debt. Oshkosh residents' latest property tax bills bear a 5 percent county tax increase. The city of Oshkosh, the school district and Fox Valley Technical College kept their increases to 2 to 3 percent or so.

Communication Arts Centers at two-year colleges are not at the tops of most taxpayers' priority lists right now.

UW-Fox Valley is playing a greater and more empowering role for students. We're just not sure how or if a costly communication arts center fits into its future. Especially in these tight economic times.

Final Thought: Still too many questions whether a \$13.9 million Communication Arts Center is the right fit for two-year UW-Fox Valley, or any two-year UW college.

ONLINE POLL

Should Winnebago County spend \$5.3 million as its share of funding a communications arts center at UW Fox Valley?

- Yes
- No
- Undecided