

SFCC delays bond issue election

Part of revenue would be used to build Higher Learning Center

By Phaedra Haywood | The New Mexican

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Santa Fe Community College will wait until next summer to ask voters to approve a property tax measure.

The school's trustees voted Thursday to postpone from Feb. 9 to Aug. 3 an election seeking voter approval of a \$35 million bond issue, part of which would be used to build a Higher Learning Center.

The board also dropped indefinitely the idea of adding a question to the ballot that would propose an additional property tax levy to generate operating funds for the center.

In proposing the delay in the bond election, board member Linda Siegle cited Santa Fe County's recent failure to win voter approval of a gross-receipts tax increase for fire protection. She also expressed concern that the political environment surrounding the New Mexico Legislature's upcoming session to deal with the state's fiscal crisis might not be conducive to winning passage of the bond issue.

"It's a really volatile time right now," Siegle said. "Tax issues will be in the news during the Legislature. It's going to be elevated in a way that makes me fearful that a Feb. 9 bond election could stir up more of that negative response ... where it's not about logic, it's about fear. If it fails in February, then we are toast."

About \$18.9 million of the revenue that would be raised from the proposed general obligation bond would be used to buy land for and construct the proposed Higher Learning Center. The remainder would be spent on projects on SFCC's main campus.

The center is proposed as a place where the community college would partner with other state schools to offer classes that could lead to bachelor's and master's degrees.

The community college is considering a 5-acre plot on the College of Santa Fe campus as the site for the Higher Learning Center.

Several other board members worried aloud that postponing the bond election might stall momentum that has gathered behind the bond effort, but the vote favoring the delay was unanimous.

More than a dozen people — most of them students — spoke in favor of the bond issue and the Higher Learning Center at Thursday's meeting. Most expressed a desire to have the opportunity to pursue higher degrees without having to commute or separate from family to attend classes elsewhere.

"I'm a mother trying to get my associate's (degree) in biology," Teresa Garcia said. "And I'm looking at the future and I'm wondering what I'm gonna do when I have four kids to pick up from two schools and I need to be in classes in (The University of New Mexico in Albuquerque) to finish my bachelor's. I don't know how that's going to work. If I could do it here in Santa Fe it would make it a lot easier."

Board chair Bruce Besser made the motion to defer asking school district voters to approve a separate property tax increase to fund operations at the proposed center.

"The revenue stream won't be needed until 2 1/2 years from now," Besser said. "We should defer it until a time when we can better present to the community the benefits of the Learning Center."

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