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unexpected windfall in hard times

USF Polytechnic Will Get \$11.4 Million From Florida Budget

Proposed plan includes money for construction, funding for faculty.

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LAKELAND | Despite the state's budget woes, the University of South Florida Polytechnic fared better in the new state budget plan than it has in the past two years.

The state's proposed budget includes construction money and additional funding for future faculty members.

It is a year behind in its construction funding because of a 2007 veto that nixed money the Legislature had approved, but now the university will receive \$11.4 million in this, the second of a three-year funding plan to provide enough money to construct its new campus at the junction of I-4 and the Polk County Parkway.

"We were able to use a combination of PECO (Public Education Capital Outlay) funds and general revenue to get the money needed," said Sen. J.D. Alexander, R-Lake Wales, who is the budget chief for the Senate. "It was a tough budget year, but this is an important project."

The state Board of Governors, which oversees the state university system, had recommended only \$3.6 million for USF Poly construction funding this year, and



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Lakeland Mayor Ralph L. "Buddy" Fletcher is presented the Distinguished Service Award during the University of South Florida Polytechnic Spring Commencement at the Lakeland, Center, May 4, 2009 in Lakeland, Florida.

that's the amount the House included in its budget. The Senate had \$11 million.

During negotiations to resolve the difference, the Senate version prevailed. Last year, the Legislature earmarked \$15 million after a 2007 veto of construction money by Gov. Charlie Crist.

Supporters and university officials hope to get a final \$15 million needed to start construction in the 2010 session of the Legislature.

In addition to the construction money and the annual funding, Alexander was able to get another \$5 million for faculty and staff at the new campus. He announced the item Saturday during budget negotiations after the regular session of the Legislature had recessed.

It was an item, Alexander said, that the state Board of Governors had recommended but that hadn't made it into the budget.

Some commentators criticized him for what they said was bringing home a piece of pork. But Alexander said if the money is not allotted and faculty not hired before the new campus is open to students in 2012, it will not have met its agreement that allows USF Poly autonomy within the university branches.

"The \$5 million is half of what they need to hire professors and staff and increase the student population for the move to the new campus," Alexander said. "I felt with the tight budget we could not get the entire \$10 million in one year."

The estimated cost overall is \$62 million. That includes architect's fees, but there isn't a separate budget for those fees, said David Steele, director of university advancement for USF Poly.

Negotiations are ongoing with Santiago Calatrava, an internationally known Spanish architect and engineer who is the top choice to design the new campus. Steele said the negotiations will establish what the architect's fees will be. He said there isn't a deadline for concluding negotiations.

"If they linger into the fall, they might impact our ground breaking, but at this time, there is no reason to think that would be an issue," Steele said.

ROAD TO THE CAMPUS

Sweetening the pot even more is \$28 million in federal stimulus money that has been approved to construct an east-west route from Pace Road and the Polk County Parkway to State Road 33. There is not a road into the site where the new campus will be built.

Last year, Sen. Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland, was able to obtain state money for the Pace Road interchange with Polk Parkway, and the state has already approved

money for widening a two-lane section of the parkway from Pace to I-4 to four lanes.

"We anticipate that most students will travel on the east-west route from 33," USF Poly official David Steele said.

While the Legislature will not vote on the new state budget until Friday, approval is pretty much a foregone conclusion.

Under reforms passed several years ago, the budget, once agreed upon by the House and Senate conference committees and the leadership in both chambers, must sit for 72 hours before it is voted on.

That gives everyone time to look at the budget, to look for special appropriations and to see everything that has been funded.

The system is designed to prevent legislators from hiding special-interest money and favors within the budget.

In theory, though it has never happened, if the budget were to be changed Friday, it likely would have to go through another 72-hour wait.

TUITION WILL INCREASE

USF Poly is subject to one change that affects all universities in the state system. There is an 8 percent increase per credit hour for undergraduate courses in the proposed budget.

State universities and colleges will have an option to increase up to 15 percent with the approval of their trustees and the Board of Governors.

The USF Poly charge per credit hour this year was \$98.75. Next year, it has to go to \$106.65. If it were to go to 15 percent, USF Poly would be charging \$113.56.

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