OLIVIA GARCIA: Local college district to consider bond measure in fall

BY OLIVIA GARCIA For The Californian

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I caught up with Tom Gelder, executive director of the Bakersfield College Foundation, on a recent warm summer day.

The campus wasn’t as busy with the usual fall and spring traffic, but the conversations about a proposed bond measure that would benefit the campus and two other colleges was flowing through the air.

On July 14, the Kern Community College District Board of Trustees will consider placing a proposed bond measure on the Nov. 8 ballot to make improvements on campuses of Bakersfield College, Porterville College and Cerro Coso Community College.

The proposed measure, which is estimated at $527 million, would require a 55 percent voter approval for passage. If voters approve the measure, a temporary tax levy would be authorized to secure the bonds at an estimated $25 per assessed property of $100,000.
For Bakersfield College, the bond measure brings hope and excitement, said Gelder.

Although the BC campus opened its doors in 1913 at the Kern County Union High School campus with 13 students, it moved to the Panorama campus in 1956, reaching about 1,300 students, campus officials said.

Today, the BC campus swells with a student population reaching 26,000, according to 2016 campus figures. Altogether, the KCCD serves about 40,000 students, drawing students from Kern, Tulare, Inyo, Mono, and San Bernardino counties, figures show.

Since then, the type of student services and its student population have expanded and evolved.

The campuses serve transfer students, two-year students, vocational students, veterans and active military students. In addition, while the college provides higher education and certifications, it also serves as job training facilities for firefighters, 911 emergency responders and police officer agencies.

Serving veterans while continuing to provide students with affordable, high-education education is one of the goals of the campus, and the bond measure could go a long way in helping, officials said. Recently BC was approved to be one of only 15 colleges authorized to offer a baccalaureate degree.

In a recent blog, BC President Sonya Christian wrote:

“Our campus has over 30 buildings, many of which are aged and their current condition cries out for expansion and modernization. Looking back, I wondered what care and maintenance had been done over the last 50 years... and looking forward for the next 50 years and beyond, we developed our comprehensive Facilities Master Plan.

“When you are talking about the needs of 153 acres and satellite locations, with buildings over 50 years old, and the needs adding up to over $400 million, the challenge is finding a funding source. Our District Board of Trustees is seriously considering a potential bond measure.”

Gelder said the proposed bond measure would be used to repair and upgrade outdated learning spaces and facilities while expanding services in other areas of need.

Some examples of proposed improvements include upgrading the Humanities, Family & Consumer Education, Fine Arts and Language Arts buildings, replacing the Science & Engineering building, and renovating Memorial Stadium.

Some of the expansion proposals include developing an Arvin/Lamont/Greenfield Facility and constructing a Veterans Resource Center, multi-purpose building and student campus center at the Delano campus. Other initiatives include energy, campus safety, roofing and parking projects.

Another big goal is to upgrade and expand its veterans services.
According to a website, A Better BC, created to raise awareness about the proposal, about 68 percent of individuals who participated in a commissioned independent survey agreed they would support it if placed on the fall ballot.

Now, for full disclosure, I have taught at BC for several years as an adjunct, and out of that experience, I can agree that there are buildings and classrooms in need of major improvements, and many of my students will agree.

However, the initial decision will be first left to the KCCD board to decide whether to move forward with the ballot measure, and then next, the voters who will consider supporting the proposed measure come November.

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