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Senate Republicans propose more funding, 2-year tuition freeze for colleges

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A two-year tuition freeze and \$50 million to attract top scientists are part of the Ohio Senate Republican's higher education plan in the new two-year budget.

In all, GOP leaders said they will spend \$180 million more on higher education than the House-passed budget, which itself spent more than \$150 million more than the budget initially proposed by Gov. Ted Strickland.

"That's not just giving lip service to higher education," said Senate President Bill M. Harris, adding that the lawmakers are giving universities the chance to "drive Ohio's economic engine."

In Ohio, where tuition has skyrocketed over the past decade to some of the highest rates in the nation, the Senate will slam the brakes, providing another \$120 million so universities can freeze rates over the next two years.

Strickland had proposed a freeze in 2008, and a 3-percent increase in 2009. The House-passed plan proposed flipping those figures.

Sen. John A. Carey Jr., a Wellston Republican and chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, said he hopes the freeze "gets people excited about taking advantage of higher education opportunities and make college more affordable to meet that goal."

State Chancellor Eric D. Fingerhut offered strong praise for the plan, though GOP leaders are not yet saying where they'll get the money to pay for it.

"Obviously we believe affordability of higher education is one of the cornerstones of what will turn our state around," he said.

The Senate also is proposing a new \$50 million Ohio Innovation Partnership program, designed to recruit teams of scientists to the state, in hopes that their research would blossom into the kind of high-tech companies that state leaders say are vital to transforming Ohio's industrial-based economy.

Sen. Jeff Jacobson, R-Vandalia, noted that 25 years ago, Texas recruited 32 scientists to the University of Texas, and soon after landed Motorola and a semi-conductor consortium.

"Our research profile is better in Ohio than where Texas was when it started," Jacobson said, adding that the goal would be to focus on the strengths of Ohio's economy, helping it stand out from other states.

The money, Jacobson said, could recruit about 40 teams of scientists.

"These are people who would be entering their peak productive years, sort of at the 40-year-old group," he said. "They spin off companies and bring with them future star researchers in their entourage."

“It should produce an environment in which the technology companies that Ohio produces will have more ability to stay here and be nurtured here.”

After years of getting the ugly stepchild treatment from lawmakers during budget time, universities suddenly have been shoved to the forefront as Strickland and GOP legislative leaders stress their importance in turning around Ohio's economic slide.

Fingerhut, a Strickland appointee, said the governor helped change the attitude toward higher education. He also said House and Senate leaders deserve much credit for going even further, “seeing there is an opportunity to transform our state.”

The Senate-proposed budget would boost all higher education spending 5.6 percent next year and 9.8 percent in 2009.

This includes an additional \$10 million for the **James A. Rhodes Scholarship**, aimed at students attending two-year community or technical colleges. Carey called it seed money designed to attract another \$55 million in private funds.

“We think it's important that we recognize the role of two-year community and technical colleges,” Carey said.

The Senate also hopes to add detail to the new \$100 million scholarship program developed by House Speaker Jon A. Husted, R-Kettering. Designed to encourage students to pursue so-called STEM degrees in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, Senate leaders say their plan would have universities bid for blocks of money.

The goal is the money is targeted toward regional strengths, and leaders want to get a 1-to-1 match from local universities.

Fingerhut said he likes the idea.

“We need to build in this states centers of excellence that are true drivers of our regional economies,” he said. “This gives us an opportunity to do exactly that.”

Senate leaders hope to pass the budget next week, when it is expected to head to a joint conference committee where the House and Senate can work out their differences.

Strickland must sign the budget by June 30.

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