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Has C-TEC righted its ship enough for new taxes?

APRIL 27, 2010

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The perfect storm that's hovered over the Career & Technology Centers of Licking County the past few years cannot be solely blamed on the legal saga following the vocational school's expansion.



Its funding challenges largely are a direct result of the air rushing out the county's housing market before and during the Great Recession. With the county's property values stagnant for the first time in years, the regular revenue boosts C-TEC thrived on came to a quick and sudden end.

That's a key reason for why previous editorial boards have supported the past three attempts by C-TEC to pass a 1-mill operating levy countywide at a cost of \$31 per \$100,000 of property value. It was a simple matter of maintaining valuable programs that train young people for real jobs or making cuts.

Of course, nothing is simple for C-TEC since

a judge ruled Dec. 24 that the school and its architect owed a Newark

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construction company \$3.8 million plus interest for unpaid work on the expanded Price Road school. That news came on top of \$2 million in C-TEC legal fees and an unwise loan of \$3.3 million for cost overruns and to finish the expansion with a new contractor.

C-TEC wisely has settled its debt for \$500,000, with the contractor now going after the architect blamed in the ruling for misleading C-TEC officials about delays. The school will borrow that money and another \$200,000 in legal fees over 25 years at a cost of about \$1.4 million with interest. Combined with another long-term bond for the \$3.3 million (plus interest that roughly doubles the amount) and the past costs, about \$10 million will be spent.

It's quite simply the biggest waste of taxpayer funds Licking County has ever seen.

And now C-TEC is back on the May 4 ballot, asking voters for \$3 million more per year.

Thus, we had to ask C-TEC's leadership what's changed? Why should voters trust you again?

In two editorial board meetings, new C-TEC Superintendent Joyce Malainy, who inherited the mother of all messes in January, did her best to assure us the school never would be the same no matter what voters say May 4.

She's already secured board approval to eliminate 21 positions, saving \$1.6 million annually regardless of the vote. A levy loss would cut another 22 positions, saving \$1.7 million through the elimination of 15 more programs.

Malainy also led C-TEC to end its legal mess, settling for about 10 percent of what the cost could have been. The bonding of C-TEC's debts, although costly overall, means the district's annual costs are being kept in check and allowing any new levy dollars to primarily fund education, not litigation. This levy is not a lawsuit bailout.

Board president Bob Handelman, a Newark school board member, joined the second session to defend the board's handling of the expansion, arguing C-TEC was guilty of nothing more than accepting bad professional advice. He's told us there's no evidence anyone in C-TEC acted in bad faith and there was no need to investigate what went wrong, nor any need for apologies.

His limited comments were the first by anyone associated with C-TEC to explain what happened despite obvious need to provide taxpayers with a full explanation. We found his comments helpful but short of what we believe needs to be said to our community, namely an apology or promise of what will be done going forward.

Regardless, the financial woes are very real with a year-end projected balance of less than \$500,000 on a budget of \$13.5 million.

With no more construction projects on the horizon, new and capable leadership in place and a long record of providing teens, adults and employers with strong job-training programs, one certainly can argue the C-TEC institution is far too valuable to Licking County to allow more storm clouds to gather.

It's up to voters.

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