

CONCORD

Supervisor pushes a state university for Contra Costa

Despite enrollment decline, he suggests branch's expansion

- Carrie Sturrock, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Despite dwindling enrollment and a budget with no room for growth, the dream of turning Cal State Hayward's small branch campus in Concord into a full-fledged university -- or at least significantly expand it -- hasn't died.

For Contra Costa Supervisor Mark DeSaulnier, that goal is almost an issue of pride: Contra Costa County, with its million-plus population, is the only one of California's 10 largest counties without a CSU or University of California campus.

DeSaulnier is so determined to see it happen that he encouraged the county Board of Supervisors to pass a resolution last month supporting such a move.

"I see it as a coming of age of Contra Costa County," he said. "We've grown and prospered in the last 20 years. Having a CSU campus is appropriate as we've grown and changed into a county of a million people."

Since the branch campus first opened off Ygnacio Valley Road in 1992, supporters have envisioned turning it into a university. But enrollment has stagnated, putting the idea on the back burner. And the state's budget crisis means extra cash isn't floating around to make the project a reality.

Still, DeSaulnier believes it can be done with creative financing and support from county leaders and businesses.

Concord campus President Peter Wilson, who began his tenure a year ago, agrees the branch needs to grow but says successful expansion doesn't necessarily require becoming a free-standing CSU with its own accounting and personnel departments.

"It's a lot more efficient for us to be part of Hayward than it is for us to break away," he said. "The key thing right now -- and Mark and I are in agreement -- is to develop what we've got."

The Concord campus can harness the power of Cal State Hayward more than ever to generate its own expansion, especially now that the university is considering renaming it Cal State East Bay, Wilson said. That could mean a greater regional focus and more support for the Concord campus.

"The university seems to be making a much stronger commitment than it has in the past to developing this site as part of the university," Wilson said. "That's what is different. That is what gives me hope that when we do have a plan of action in place, something will happen."

When the Contra Costa campus first opened, the state predicted it would grow to 1,457 full-time students by 1995. It currently has 690, down from 770 the year before because of budget cuts that eliminated some classes. One reason it hasn't grown faster is that a highway planned for the area fell through, leaving it stranded miles away from interstate access.

Wilson envisions the branch campus developing its own unique programs such as an environmental studies degree focused on the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. And local community colleges, which offer lower division courses for freshman and sophomores on their respective campuses, could essentially move onto the Cal State Hayward Contra Costa campus to do that.

To finance the expansion, DeSaulnier envisions having businesses interested in various areas - say, environmental studies - sponsor the construction of a building for that department or program.

Wilson has a track record of making such creative financing happen. As dean of San Bernardino's branch campus at Palm Desert, he was key to raising \$19.5 million for permanent buildings and oversaw annual enrollment of at least 10 percent.

"It's something that takes patience and the cultivation of people who are interested in supporting what we're doing," he said.

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