

Recommendation of the Board of Regents to the Montana Legislature on the Approval of a New Community College District in Ravalli County

Context

In August 2008, the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education (OCHE) began the process of requesting and compiling information related to the Board of Regents' recommendation on the approval of a new community college district in Ravalli County. On November 15, 2008, OCHE posted its written analysis of the information and issues related to the recommendation. On November 20, 2008, the Board of Regents heard testimony and discussed the OCHE analysis on the proposed new community college district as a priority item on its agenda, devoting the majority of that day's meeting to the matter. The Deputy Commissioner of Two-Year Education presented a summary of the written analysis to the Board of Regents. Then the seven trustees-elect and alternate trustee-elect of the proposed new community college district each made a presentation to the Board. Thereafter, the Board received oral testimony from 21 persons, almost all of whom testified in favor of the creation of a new community college district in Ravalli County. Between November 20 and December 1, 2008, the Board received additional written commentary from the Bitterroot Valley Community College Effort (BVCC-E) and numerous other interested individuals.

Having read the report in its entirety, listened to the presentations and testimony on November 20, and reviewed the written commentary and correspondence sent to the Board on this issue, the Board of Regents concludes the following:

- With 15 two-year colleges currently operating in Montana, one of which is only 50 miles away from the center of the proposed new community college district, devoting additional state resources to a new two-year college is difficult to support.
- With all the potential that 21st-century technologies, transparent transferability, seamless K-12/college pathways, and collaborative approaches bring to the higher education environment, replicating an infrastructure-intensive 20th-century model seems unnecessary and unwise.

Primarily for these reasons, the Board of Regents cannot in good conscience recommend approval of a new community college district in Ravalli County. Even if the addition of a new community college district were otherwise supportable, the needs assessment, academic plan, and business plan for the proposed new community college in Ravalli County do not give us the necessary confidence that the new community college, if approved, can assure students and taxpayers of the appropriate quality, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness of programs and services.

That said, several aspects of the advocacy for the new community college have merit:

- Ravalli County has a significant population base and an economy threatened by the current economic trends – a context well-suited to two-year college programming.

- Ravalli County has a unified, community-minded, and forward-thinking board of trustees-elect and supporters who have the commitment to two-year education and the understanding of community resources necessary for a higher education presence, however modeled, to succeed in Ravalli County.
- The advantages of a coordinated approach to adult education and community outreach may be considerable and should be explored through a higher education partnership with the local school districts and those entities engaged in literacy, community development, and economic development in Ravalli County.

In addition, at least two criticisms advocates make of the university system's efforts at program development in Ravalli County appear justified:

- Efforts to date have not carved out a significant role for the community itself to play in the identification, coordination, and evaluation of higher education programming in Ravalli County.
- Efforts to date have not been grounded in a strategic plan that begins with needs assessment, engages the community in a vision, and targets resources to achieve that vision.

Recommendation Adopted December 4, 2008

Therefore, the action of the Board of Regents with regard to the proposed new community college is two-pronged:

- 1) We recommend that the Montana legislature NOT approve the proposed new community college district in Ravalli County. However,
- 2) We also charge the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education to work with the trustees-elect in Ravalli County, in consultation with representatives from the Postsecondary Education Planning and Budget Interim Subcommittee, to establish an innovative two-year education model in Ravalli County, guided by local stakeholders, supported by the infrastructure of the Montana University System and its multiple campuses, and making use of successful programs and services offered by Montana's two-year colleges.