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Legislators, community colleges discuss budget future

BOISE - Lawmakers and community college administrators broke bread Monday while hoping to repair budget concerns. Members of both groups gathered at lunchtime for an Italian meal at Old Spaghetti Factory in Boise. While most eyes look to the Capitol where budgets are made, lunch at the restaurant a few blocks away was a way for legislators and community college administrators to get acquainted at the start of the session.

"Being at CSI has really opened up a lot of doors for me," Blake Lawson, vice president of CSI's student body, told lawmakers. Lawson, a physical therapy major, said community colleges provide an affordable choice for students looking to get an education.

CSI President Jerry Beck thanked legislators for their past support, and alluded to the state's present financial woes. "I don't know if I want to thank you for what you might do to us," said Beck.

North Idaho College President Priscilla Bell reminded legislators that enrollment at community colleges has grown in recent years. Bert Glandon, president of the College of Western Idaho, reflected the state's budget situation with his version of a famous Charles Dickens line. "It's the best of times," he said. "It's the worst of times."

In CWI's case, the best of times refers to becoming part of Idaho's community college system, he said.

Like every area of the state's budget, lawmakers are concerned about community colleges as the state deals with revenue shortfalls. But with tuition dollars, the colleges have a means to increase funding separate from their state appropriation, an advantage their counterparts in K-12 public education don't have.

"If there's any area of higher education that's better positioned to deal with this shortfall, it probably is the community colleges," said Rep. Stephen Hartgen, R-Twin Falls. "The reason is they are so well attuned to the employment needs of the community."

Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter's budget recommendation for community colleges in the next fiscal year is \$25.3 million, down more than \$1 million from the original \$26.4 million appropriation for the current fiscal year, before holdbacks were requested.

For now, CSI is working through the numbers and talking with other community colleges to make sure everyone is on the same page before the final breakdown for CSI under Otter's proposal will be known, Beck said. Lawmakers and community college administrators will get down to the details of budget numbers and needs of community colleges when the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee has higher-education hearings with input from community colleges on Jan. 27.