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Voter approval of bond issue touted as ‘change in culture of higher education’

The academic community, along with legislators and the building industry, cheered the passage of the \$750 million bond referendum to finance construction at New Jersey's colleges and universities.

“The voters have demonstrated what families across New Jersey already know, that investing in higher education is possibly the single most important thing that we can do to assure that our children have a future that is full of opportunity, promise and potential,” said Dr. Robert Barchi, president of Rutgers University. “The bond act passing means immediate construction jobs and long-term high-tech jobs for the state, as well as better educational opportunities, and stronger economic growth.”

The bond act requires that schools put up 25 percent of the funding for the capital projects, like the science buildings planned at Caldwell College, which President Nancy Blattner said ensures that the institutions have “skin in the game.”

“New Jerseyans did the right thing for the economy and for the college students who will become tomorrow’s leaders in the Garden State,” Blattner said.

Kathleen Waldron, president of William Paterson University said the first step in moving forward is to thank the people who made the investment possible, including bipartisan efforts at the state government level. She said the best way to thank the taxpayers who voted for the bond was to “spend very wisely” on the projects.

Nearly two-thirds of voters who went to the polls on Tuesday approved the measure. There was concern before the election that few New Jersey residents were aware of the bond issue on the ballot, but Waldron said that voters’ “competitive juices” got flowing once it was widely known that New Jersey was one of five states in the nation that had not funded higher education construction in the last 10 years.

Montclair State University President Susan Cole said that while the advertising and lobbying effort was short but intense, the campaign to pass the bond built off of more than 10 years of educating the public about the state’s lack of financial support for its universities and colleges.

Cole said the vote indicated a “change in culture of higher education” in New Jersey, and in response Montclair has two projects already designed: a new business school facility and a new life sciences facility, which was designed by New Jersey architecture firm, Environetics.

In addition to the colleges receiving funds for new facilities, the construction industry will also benefit from the new projects coming down the pipeline. Cole credited unions and other business advocates for communicating about the bond with their constituents, and some local architecture firms have already begun to work with the schools to prepare for the projects.

Michael Shakten, a principal at KSS Architects in Princeton, said the requirements in the bond issue that must be met before funding will be distributed fits nicely with the services his firm provides. Shakten said KSS has already worked with schools to provide not only building plans, but the master facility plans required to show the state how the new construction projects would fit into each college or university.

KSS's core market is in higher education, and Shakten said that projects that have been delayed are now coming online and facilities that were once built to two-thirds of their original design may now be able to be constructed to their full potential.

Shakten said that while KSS did not advocate a position on the bond issue to its employees, there was a lot of communication about the bond measure in the office, as well as with the longtime clients the firm has served. Shakten said the bonding will allow his firm to concentrate more on New Jersey projects without having to look for work elsewhere in the region.

Assembly Speaker Sheila Oliver (D-Newark) and Assembly Higher Education Committee Chairwoman Celeste Riley (D-Bridgeton) were among a group of politicians to express their praise for the voters' decision to fund the construction. Others expressing support for the outcome included Senate President Stephen M. Sweeney (D-West Deptford), who said that along with the restructuring of higher education in the state, the bond would "change the landscape" in New Jersey.

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