

college funding

Auraria building gets a pump-up

Lawmakers unveil a plan to use rising oil and gas royalties to keep construction going on a new science facility.

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Auraria Campus executive vice president Dean Wolf kicks-off a news conference to publicize the loss of funding for a new Science building that is already under construction on the campus, at rear. (Brian Brainerd, The Denver Post)

After college leaders complained that funding for the Auraria campus science building had been cut, state Democrats on Tuesday unveiled a plan to tap gas royalties to restore the project.

Ground had already been broken for the \$111 million building when lawmakers said last week

that the money would be cut off because of a dire new economic forecast that showed state revenues plummeting by nearly \$700 million over the next five years.

But at the same time, forecasts also showed oil and gas royalties paid to the state from the federal government were increasing more than expected. Lawmakers already were working on plans to use a portion of the royalties' growth on brick-and-mortar projects on campuses, and projections showed there was about \$10 million more in new revenue than expected this year.

At a Tuesday afternoon news conference, Gov. Bill Ritter and Democratic legislative leaders announced a plan to use part of the expected yearly growth in oil and gas royalties to leverage as much as \$150 million for campus projects.

Of that, the Auraria science building is expected to get an estimated \$63.6 million, money that, with current commitments, would allow the campus to complete the facility sooner than expected and at a lower cost, said Rep. Bernie Buescher, D-Grand Junction, chairman of the Joint Budget Committee.

On Monday, three college presidents had gathered at the great hole on the Auraria campus — site of the planned science building — in an effort to shame lawmakers into funding the project. Tuesday, they got what they wanted.

"I think they were able to put the need in perspective," said Dean Wolf, executive vice

president of the Auraria campus. "When you're faced with a budget shortfall, sometimes decisions are made in haste."

While the outcry over funding for the science building getting cut created a "bigger sense of urgency," lawmakers were already considering ways to fund the facility, Buescher said.

"Are we knuckling under? No," Buescher said. "This was the next project on the list anyway."

Lawmakers will now consider which projects that lost funding could have it restored. Those might include projects at Adams State College in Alamosa, Western State College in Gunnison and the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, Buescher said.

Wolf certainly believed that the uproar by Auraria campus leaders was effective.

"I think that had a lot of impact because it showed that everybody on the campus was on the same page," he said.

The plan to use revenue from federal oil and gas royalties for campus construction projects has bipartisan support.

Sen. Josh Penry, R-Grand Junction, a key GOP backer, said there are plenty of other needs.

"I think Auraria did a good job of ginning up the outrage," he said, "but there are projects in these energy-producing areas that shouldn't be forgotten."

Rep. Cory Gardner, R-Yuma, questioned why the money wasn't being used to provide tax relief to Coloradans.

Republicans have been sharply critical of the budget outlined by Democratic leaders this week that includes adding 1,334 employees to the state's payroll. Democrats have said the new employees are necessary to address growing needs in prisons, colleges and courts, among other areas.

"There seems to be a lot of fat in this budget that could have been used to find the funding for the Auraria campus," Gardner said.

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