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Task force eyes 4-year degrees at college

Expanding higher-education options would build needed skills into the county's work force

By JONATHAN GALLARDO News Record Writer jgallardo@gillette newsrecord.net Jul 14, 2016

Local officials tout the potential for economic growth should Gillette College offer four-year bachelor's degrees and more.

County Commissioner Mark Christensen said that Energy Capital Economic Development's Higher Education Task Force hopes to bring more degrees to the college.

Whether that will include four-year degrees, master's programs, a partnership with the University of Wyoming or a combination of all three is not yet known. A market analysis will be conducted that will concentrate on the future of higher education in Campbell County.

"What this is really focusing on is a market analysis not just of what we have right now, but what we're going to have, what kind of industry is attractive, like the activated carbon and those kind of things. What kind of degrees are needed in support of those facilities and industries?" Christensen said at the Energy Capital Economic Development quarterly breakfast Thursday morning.

One of the benefits of having higher-level degrees is that it brings more people into the area, he said.

"You have very consistent students, you have consistent renters, you have people in town, you have people to work, and that's part of what this goal is," Christensen said. "The other piece is really a desire that we get a work force that fits Gillette, and that the education components work with that."

The task force also emphasized preparing for the future not just for local industry, but also for members of the work force who might step down soon.

“When the mines grew, the county basically grew up at the same time,” Christensen said. “Well, all of those managers and department heads, they were all hired at the same time, and they are all retiring at the same time. There are great people to promote, but they may not have the credentials.”

Scott Durgin, a task force member, said he has heard stories about students from Gillette College who tried to transfer to another school and lost credits, and he doesn’t want that to happen.

“To me, that’s just sad,” he said. “So we thought, how can we get an avenue for people to go to school here and then transfer somewhere seamlessly and get a full bachelor’s or master’s, but then also how could we make it so you could get it here?”

Durgin said the college can’t build new buildings for new degrees. Instead, it will need to collaborate with the community.

“When you do a four-year degree, such as engineering, you have to have chemistry. You have to have a chemistry lab,” Durgin said. “To build a facility for just one engineering degree, that’s not going to happen. You’ve got to utilize what’s out there in the community.”

Part of this push to expand higher-level education in Gillette is a desire for the city to control its own destiny, said Phil Christopherson, CEO for Energy Capital Economic Development.

“We want to shape our future. We want to do things that are going to impact our community for the next 10, 20, 50 and 100 years,” he said. “We don’t want to randomly let this business or this political environment say, ‘This is what you are going to be, Gillette and Campbell County.’”

Gillette College President Mark Englert said higher education is “part of the economic engine of the community.”

“What we have to do is pick the right degrees, because if you leave it to me, the educator, I’m going to pick them all,” he said.

Englert added one of the college’s most important products is knowledge.

“If we have access to baccalaureate and master’s degrees, we continue to produce more knowledge,” Englert said. “Anything you can do to stimulate intellectual capital in a community starts to become a driver, because people are inclined to stay. You grow this knowledge base, you grow intellectual capital locally, which is a stimulator for all kinds of things: business, industry, arts — any of those types of things.”

Besides giving them knowledge, Durgin said higher degrees will be more of a benefit for students when they leave college.

“It’s not just about grabbing somebody for four years and getting their money out of them and letting them leave,” he said. “It’s also creating a work force that when they do get out, they can stay here and find a job somewhere.”

Jonathan Gallardo