

IN OUR OPINION

LMC proposal

College needs to advance;
vote 'yes' on tax increase

On Nov. 8, voters in Berrien County, Covert Township and the South Haven school district will be asked to approve a 10-year, 0.48-mill tax increase to fund Lake Michigan College capital projects.

Should voters say "yes"? That's an easy one: Absolutely.

As far as Berrien County institutions go, it is difficult to find a more important one than LMC. To keep the region strong, it is vital that the region keep LMC strong.

We say this because so many households depend on the community college. Countless area residents over the years have started their postsecondary education careers at LMC, whether to obtain an associate degree, or in many cases using it as a springboard to a four-year degree. And in this age of skyrocketing college costs and debt, students and parents are especially wise to consider the economic advantages of community college.

In addition, numerous employers in Berrien County and beyond depend on LMC to serve as a training ground for our region's workforce. Without the college, it is fair to say any number of companies simply could not find enough skilled labor to remain here. Looking to the future, the need for a workforce with skills beyond what a high school education provides is only projected to keep increasing. According to 2013 Georgetown University Center study, 70 percent of jobs by 2020 in Michigan will require college training after high school.

With this in mind, LMC leaders have carefully examined the college's long-term needs and concluded it will need an infusion of revenue in order to thrive. That's why LMC seeks a millage increase to fund major building needs. The increase would cost the owner of a \$125,000 home – nearly the average median home value in Berrien County – about \$30 a year, raising about \$4 million a year over the next 10 years.

By law, the money could not be used for operations. It would go toward various needs such as upgrading security, modernizing classrooms, improving technology and equipment, beefing up student support services, updating heating/cooling systems, etc.

Has LMC been a good steward of taxpayer money? We believe so. LMC currently has the 24th lowest overall millage rate out of 28 community colleges in Michigan. Should this levy pass, it would have the 21st lowest rate. Also, the last time LMC raised taxes was in 1996 (0.25 mills), despite seeing state revenue sharing plummet since 2001. (The college received 17 percent of its funding from the state for the 2015-16 school year, down from 32 percent in 2001.)

In short, the college is at a crossroads. If voters approve the increase, LMC will revamp, retool and reinvigorate in order to remain an academic and economic regional powerhouse. If the millage fails, LMC will look to trim costs, tighten budgets and more or less get by as best it can.

We sincerely hope voters see the value of spending a couple of dollars a month to allow the college to achieve its vision. We can't think of a better investment in Southwest Michigan as a whole.