

Building for a future

LMC makes case for
0.48-mill capital fund

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BENTON HARBOR — For an additional \$24 per year in property taxes, Lake Michigan College can fund a variety of building projects that will enable it to deliver a well-educated, well-trained work force.

That's how President Emeritus/Acting CEO Bob Harrison sees LMC's 0.48-mill, 10-year capital millage proposal, which is on the Nov. 8 ballot. LMC's district covers Berrien County, Covert Township and the South Haven school district.

"We have community members stand up (at presentations), and talk about what Lake Michigan College has offered them, a family member or a relative. They talk about veteran's services, the Early College program, how we've helped changed peoples' lives. Generally, the feedback has been very positive, about the value that the college offers," he said.

If voters agree, the millage will raise about \$40.3 million for money-saving improvements and energy efficiencies, as well as modernized classrooms, safety and security improvements, and Student Support Services area improvements, on all of LMC's campuses.

The college also anticipates using \$7.5 million that it's collected from a community-wide capital campaign, and \$8.5 million in state grants, and other investments, to help complete the projects.

"It's important to look at what the college has already done," LMC Foundation member Scott Dienes said after Tuesday's board meeting. "Over the years, they've (LMC) been very careful, and saved money. We've raised mon-

ey, so a lot of hard work in the community's already done, to raise money."

The \$40 million being raised through the millage would be enough to meet about half of LMC's capital needs "over, probably, the next 10 to 20 years," Harrison said.

That funding would help offset a decline in state aid, which has shrunk from about 32 percent of LMC's budget, in 2001, to its current level, of 16 percent. It's a record low, an overview posted at the college's website states.

The impact of LMC's capital millage would amount to \$2 more per month – or \$24 more per year – in property taxes for a homeowner with a home valued at \$100,000, Harrison said.

The capital millage would be the first one levied in LMC's history, and would stand apart from its current operating millage of 1.78 mills, which is 24th out of Michigan's 28 community colleges, Harrison said. LMC hasn't had a new operating millage pass since 1996.

Much of the funding will focus on LMC's main campus on Napier Avenue, but its Bertrand Crossing and South Haven campuses will also get their share of attention, Harrison said.

That desire is reflected in the modernization of classroom and teaching spaces, for which LMC proposes to allocate \$7.6 million in millage funding, and \$7.7 million in college, private and state grant money.

That mixture would cover upgrades for 50 classrooms, and two lecture halls, at Napier Avenue; the Bertrand and Napier Student Success Centers; the Business Education and Resource Center; and classrooms at the South Haven campus.

Other key projects identified for completion under the millage include:

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■ Critical deferred maintenance at all campuses, for which LMC will use about \$21 million of the millage funds, plus \$7.2 million in college, private and grant funds.

■ Instructional technology and program equipment (\$5.2 million, millage

funds, plus \$8.4 million in college, private and grant funds).

■ Wine and Culinary Center (\$2.7 million, millage funds; \$2.5 million, college, private and state funds).

■ Energy efficiency improvements (\$2.1 million, millage funds; \$2.1 million, college, private and grant funds).

■ Safety and security

upgrades (\$1.7 million, millage funds).

In some cases, LMC will use its state grant – or the funds it raised through the capital campaign – to offset the various projects’ costs, Harrison said.

The college decided to study its needs at Napier Avenue first “because we have the matching dollars from the state, so that seemed like a good place to

start,” he said.

However, no specific priority list has been drawn up before the Nov. 8 election, Harrison said.

“Our first priority is to get Election Day behind us. Once we get that done, we’ll look at what the voters have told us, and we’ll adjust our capital planning,” he said.

A capital millage can only be used for buying,

building, renovating or repairing assets – such as academic equipment or classroom renovations, according to a summary posted at LMC’s website. It cannot be used for basic operating expenses, like payroll or utilities.

If the millage passes, LMC will create a special committee of district residents to oversee use of the funds, Harrison

said. “The (LMC) board will appoint that (committee), assuming the millage passes. They’ll make sure that we’re only using it for capital projects,” he said.

If the millage doesn’t pass, “then we’ll reassess whatever decision the voters make,” Harrison said. “We’re all for hopping for a (positive) millage vote.”