

November bond referendum rides on voter awareness

■ Editorial

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By The Daily Targum | 0 comments

A \$750 million bond referendum that would support financing capital projects and improvements throughout N.J. higher education institutions is set to be included on November's voting ballot. The measure itself, lead by Senate President Stephen Sweeney (D-Gloucester) and Minority leader Thomas Kean (R-Union), was approved by the state's Senate Budget Committee in June and will be used to expand and upgrade public and private colleges throughout the Garden State. Yet according to a Rutgers-Eagleton poll, few voters are actually aware that the issue even exists — let alone that they'll be asked to give their stamp of approval come November.

Considering the success of the bond issue — and by extension, the welfare of higher education institutions across the state — depends significantly on voter awareness, this is a serious problem.

According to the August poll, 55 percent of voters have heard nothing about the proposed referendum, 37 percent have heard a little, and a meager 8 percent said that they've heard "a lot." It's obvious then, that a more aggressive promotion of the bond referendum must be carried out quickly if those statistics are to change by the time voters reach the ballot boxes in two months. As a matter of fact, and as Poll Director David Redlawsk himself noted, support for the effort has and will continue to increase with this voter awareness.

Procuring financing for investments in higher education infrastructure is not something the state has been particularly productive at over the past several decades. Not since 1988 has the state issued bonds to pay for improvements on its ailing college campuses, when voters approved a \$350 million measure to revamp classrooms and build new academic buildings. But those funds were spent hastily within the following decade, and in the interim New Jersey's universities and colleges have again been left to falter. Academic buildings, residence halls and research facilities have become outdated and outmoded — a condition most palpably sensed by students on our own campus. And this lack of public investment in higher education becomes doubly concerning when one considers the fact that the Garden State is, by many accounts, is the only state in the nation that has abandoned doing so.

This year's bond referendum, then, looks to be the first laudable attempt toward investing in capital projects in the state's colleges and universities in almost 25 years. If approved, the funds from this bond — which, when paired with an additional \$500 million from previous unused borrowing allowances will amount to about \$1.3 billion — will be put toward financing the construction and improvement of academic facilities throughout the state. Such projects, in turn, can potentially create thousands of public works jobs at a time when state unemployment is at an unacceptable high. And it's not only its potential to better the quality of higher education and provide jobs in the state that make this bond approval desirable — it's largely a bipartisan measure, with widespread legislative support. In this way, the benefits of such a measure become strikingly clear.

It's important, therefore, that voters are made aware of this measure and fast — not just for the sake of the state's current institutions, which are sorely under-financed and rejected as is, but for the sake of the future of higher education in New Jersey. When it comes to keeping its best and brightest within its own universities and colleges, New Jersey's retention rate is the lowest in the country. This is as much attributable to the conditions of its schools as it is of the quality of higher education in the state. Given that the two are inexorably linked, failure to approve such a measure would be synonymous with the failure of thousands of college students across the state.

In this context, much is riding on this year's bond referendum. An aggressive campaign is in order to educate voters throughout the state on the undeniable benefits of supporting the effort, and thus higher education in New Jersey.

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Pendulum Poll

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- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

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