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Cottonwood's Bob Oliphant a relentless advocate for Verde Valley college



Dan Engler
Editor



COTTONWOOD - In Arizona, the model envisioned as an administrative college for the Verde Valley is unique to Maricopa County.

Its chief supporter, Cottonwood's Bob Oliphant, is adamant the model would work equally well in Yavapai County.

Since resigning from the Yavapai College Board of Governors in January 2014, Oliphant has steadfastly declared that the Verde Valley should have its own administrative college.

"The administrative model," Oliphant explained, "is easily attainable and would give the 70,000 residents of the Verde Valley an equal voice in post-secondary development in the County -- it provides simple equity."

"Not perfect because the west side of the county has three votes to this side's two; but easily attainable and will help relieve tensions built up over 50 years between the two sides of the county."

"More importantly, it will provide the kind of post-secondary educational focus the Verde Valley needs in a county that is larger than several states."

The Maricopa Model

There is no Maricopa County Community College. Rather, the Maricopa County Community College District delivers administrative services and funding for the 10 community colleges and two skill centers in its system.

The Maricopa County District was established in 1962, two years after the Arizona Legislature allowed for the creation of junior college districts with county and state tax dollars. Its first order of business was to absorb the existing Phoenix College - which was founded in 1920 - and within a few years Glendale and Mesa community colleges were established.

In Arizona, this community college system only exists in Maricopa County. Even Pima County, with 1 million residents, has six campuses throughout Tucson all under the singular banner of Pima Community College.

Yavapai College's beginnings

Around the same time as the Maricopa County system was established, other community colleges were popping up in Arizona. Yavapai College was created by popular vote in 1965.

Ten years later, the Verde Campus of Yavapai College was formed. It was then that the first

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seeds of the Verde Campus developing into its own administrative college were planted.

In an April 11, 1975, story in the Prescott Daily Courier, Dr. L.B. Blanchard, president of the Arizona Community College Board and a resident of Sedona, said the new campus near Clarkdale should not revolve around the Prescott campus. "It should not be a satellite campus, but a separate college," he told the Courier.

To emphasize his point, Blanchard pointed to the Maricopa County model. Instead of being known as branches of Phoenix College, he said the other schools in the Maricopa County District had their own individual identities based on the communities they served.

Of course, that was a decision to be made at the local level, and the college president at the time, Dr. Joseph Russo, told the Courier that the YC Board of Governors would have to make a policy decision on whether the Verde Campus would be a branch of Yavapai College or a separate college.

Whether that policy decision was ever voted on is hard to pin down, according to Oliphant, as "the minutes said they appointed a committee and that's the last I could find on it."

Oliphant's Research

It's certainly not for a lack of trying. During the past two years, Oliphant said he has invested "a couple of hundred hours or so" investigating the college's history on development of the Verde Campus. He has a box of material, a book in which he has documented his findings and two years' worth of CDs.

"There are more questions than answers," he said.

What he does know, though, is that 40 years after the subject of the Verde being its own administrative college was first broached, nothing has changed.

Included in Oliphant's research material is a video of a September 2014 meeting of the governing board. In that video, Board Member Ray Sigafoos said without well-researched recommendations on the "Maricopa model" from the new Verde Valley Board Advisory Committee, any action by the Governing Board would be akin to "ready, fire, aim."

To date, the Verde Valley Board Advisory Committee has made 16 recommendations to the college board -- of which 14 have received favorable review, according to YC President Penny Wills - but no recommendation has been made concerning the Verde being its own administrative college.

A 1995 Close Call

Few people on either side of Mingus Mountain have as deep a history with Yavapai College as does Verde Campus instructor Tom Schumacher. He has been with the college for 39 years and has served as Division Assistant Dean, Verde Campus Assistant Dean, Dean of Instruction and Verde Campus Executive Dean.

Schumacher said the closest the Verde Valley ever came to creation of a separate administrative college occurred in 1995.

"Dr. Eula Dean was the dean of the Verde Campus. I was her assistant dean at that time and we were asked by the YC President Dr. Doreen Dailey to consider the feasibility of becoming our own college and what steps we would need to take to make it happen," explained Schumacher, who even came up with a new name and logo for a "Verde Valley College."

In the end, though, the proposal never made it back to the president's desk, said Schumacher. It was determined "the task was far too Herculean ... In my opinion it was a rare missed opportunity and a sad moment for the Verde Valley," said Schumacher.

How Maricopa County did it

The evolution of the Maricopa County system involved a series of baby steps. It also involved close attention to what areas of the county could sustain an independent college vs. a satellite or branch campus.

According to the Maricopa Community Colleges' "Our History" page on the district website, Glendale and Camelback extensions of Phoenix College were first opened in the West Valley, while a Mesa extension opened in the East Valley. Scottsdale Community College first opened as a Mesa Community College Extension. The first South Mountain Community College classes were offered in temporary locations at local churches and schools. Paradise Valley Community College first began as an extension of Scottsdale Community College.

Affordability

Oliphant discounts the notion that the "Maricopa Model" only works because of the area's enormous property tax base.

"The challenge over here is different than one sees in Scottsdale," he said.

Oliphant points to the September 2014 video where Board Member Sigafoos said the college already had calculated that creation of an administrative college in the Verde Valley would involve about \$1.2 million in costs for new personnel and administrative services.

"The college did a cost analysis in September, 2014," said Oliphant. "It reported that the total

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cost would be \$1.2 million in additional costs. In terms of population, the east side of the county has a population of around 70,000. There are approximately 30,000 residents within three miles of the Verde Campus. This is a population that can easily support a community college. Residents on the east side now support all of the costs associated with running the Sedona Center and the Verde Campus, based on financial data supplied by the College. In addition, there is somewhere from \$5 million to 7.5 million revenue they would potentially receive that now goes to the west side of the county."

Eye on Yavapai

Oliphant has his own bully pulpit to spread his message about Yavapai College and the Verde Campus in his web site "Eye on Yavapai College."

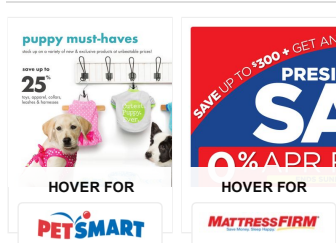
His is a highly critical message of the policy decisions of the Yavapai College District Governing Board and the college administration, in particular its president, Dr. Penny Wills.

It is always a forum where Oliphant touts the virtues and advantages of the Verde Valley having its own college.

"A community college could take many forms depending on what the residents want and its focus. There's no doubt it's doable financially -- it probably wouldn't be investing millions in tennis courts, dinner theatres and indoor therapy pools. It would be investing in education," he said.

"And it needs a different direction and a leader."

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