

Maricopa college district raises property taxes



Mary Beth Faller, The Republic | azcentral.com 11:30 a.m. MST May 28, 2014



(Photo: The Republic)

Property owners will see higher taxes this July after the Maricopa County Community College District governing board approved an increase in the tax levy Tuesday night.

This is the fourth tax increase in seven years and the second in a row for the 10-college district.

Taxes will increase by \$2.51 a year per \$100,000 of assessed property, for a total tax assessment by the district of \$128.24 on that \$100,000 in property.

Last month, the district increased tuition by \$3 per credit hour, to \$84 per credit.

The 2 percent increase in the tax levy, along with the tuition increase and taxes on new construction in the county, will generate about \$21 million in additional revenue for the colleges.

The district will spend \$7.2 million of the revenue on the information technology department, which is recovering from a widespread data breach last year, as well as \$3.3 million to bring the salaries of longer serving faculty up to the pay levels of more recently hired faculty. The colleges also will spend \$2.3 million on student-success initiatives and \$500,000 on need-based scholarships.

The vote on the tax increase was 4-1, with board president Dana Saar and members Doyle Burke, Alfredo Gutierrez and Randolph Lumm voting for it and Debra Pearson voting against it.

"If you're for education and you're against taxes, you're not for education," Lumm said. "There's a cost to it."

Saar said he was voting for the increase because he was convinced the money would be spent to help students.

Pearson said the state Legislature "has been derelict to the community colleges" for decreasing funding over the last several years. State aid went from 10 percent of the district's revenue a few years ago to about 1 percent now, at \$7.4 million for 2014-15.

"But I don't believe the answer is in property taxes," said Pearson, who said later in the meeting that she would not be running for re-election to her District 3 seat. "I have a moral objection to property taxes."

About 60 percent of the district's revenue is from property taxes, and the community colleges account for about 12 percent of a property owner's annual bill.

Monica Dorcey, a volunteer with Valley Interfaith Project, a community organization composed of religious and civic leaders, spoke in support of the tax hike.

"These community colleges are the best driver of economic development that we have," said Dorcey, who is also a member of the board of Arizona Career Pathways, a non-profit job-training program that has a partnership with the community colleges.

"If you don't have a skilled workforce you're not going to have an economic recovery for everybody."

After the tax vote, the members voted 5-0 to give a 1 percent pay increase to residential and adjunct faculty and most other employee groups.

The board also approved the 2014-15 budget. The \$774 million operating budget is about 8 percent higher than this year's budget. The total budget, including the auxiliary, restricted and capital funds, is \$1.7 billion.

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