

OUR VIEW

Commitment to education must include UW-EC

The unanimous support from local legislators expressed during Friday's Eggs and Issues session for construction of a new UW-Eau Claire science building is hardly a surprise. That has never really been in question. The question is whether it matters to the rest of the Legislature.

Legislators approved funding for the new building back in 2019. That \$109 million was a first installment, with the Legislature expecting to put the second part of the bill in a future budget. Instead, the chambers have dithered, failing to follow through on their promise.

The result is clear. The price tag for the second part of the funding was originally estimated at \$147 million. But rising construction costs have pushed it to \$235.5 million in the current request. The Legislature's twiddling of its collective thumbs will cost Wisconsin taxpayers at least \$88.5 million.

That's hardly what we'd call good governance or careful stewardship of the taxpayers' money.

The support on Friday is good to hear. It's easy to take things for granted sometimes, and the willingness of local legislators to reaffirm their commitment to the funding is welcome. And, with the UW system's Board of Regents apparently bumping the building to a higher priority in its budget request, there might be reason for cautious optimism.

We wouldn't blame anyone for being a little skeptical, though. Sometimes it seems there's a good-sized gap between the obvious path and the one the Legislature winds up taking.

The prior reluctance to move ahead with the project is mystifying. This isn't a hidden cost. It was planned well before now. And the Legislature's previous earmarking of funds clearly indicated that the state planned to proceed.

In January 2021 we editorialized about why we thought the Legislature needed to follow through. That time we hoped they would reverse the university system's head-scratching decision to leave the funding out of its budget proposal. And, like today, we noted the local unity among lawmakers.

At that time we noted the university dodged a considerable bullet in February 2020, when a fire broke out in the 1960s era building that currently houses science classrooms. The building doesn't have sprinklers, but the fire was contained and extinguished.

It makes less than zero sense for science classes, which routinely involve potentially combustible materials, to lack a sprinkler system. Lacking one wouldn't even be an option for a new building. We said nearly two years ago that failing to rectify the situation would border on negligence.

Failing to do it now, when the building's age increases and there is no good excuse for not knowing the risk, wouldn't border on negligence. It would be intentionally ignoring a clear need for the local university and placing people at risk as a result.

The evolution of the classroom has been stunning over the past 30 years. Plunk a student from the early 1900s into a 1990s era classroom and they'd likely have recognized most of the components. Electricity itself might be new, but the fundamental teacher-blackboard-desks approach was not all that different from what it had been.

The classroom today is far more enmeshed with technology than 30 years ago. Where the average classroom might have had a computer — singular — at that time, today there are usually at least as many as there are students. Almost every person is carrying a phone with greater capabilities than a circa-1993 computer could have dreamed of. And that has changed quite a few things.

Having a science building that's actually able to keep up with science isn't a luxury. It's a necessity to teach the subject well. It's a necessity to attract students for whom science is a future career and instructors of the desired quality.

Getting this funding through is a test of the Legislature's very commitment to education and to the University of Wisconsin system. It's also a test of local legislators' abilities to make colleagues understand the situation. We wish them luck in that task.

We know there are few guarantees as next year's legislative session approaches, if indeed there are any. But we can think of no good reason for the Legislature to again pass up the chance to fulfill its promise.