

BUDGET EXPANDS DOCTOR TRAINING IN WNC, CUTS WCU TUITION

MARK BARRETT, *The Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 29, 2016



Money in a House-Senate budget deal would increase training of doctors and other health care professionals in Western North Carolina. (Photo: Stock photo via Pixabay)

ASHEVILLE –

A budget deal moving through the state General Assembly this week would increase the number of physicians and other health professionals trained in Western North Carolina and decrease tuition paid by students at Western Carolina University.

The spending package would also move up the repeal of a state law restricting operations of Mission Health, provide for more workers and capital improvements at DuPont State Recreational Forest and give UNC Asheville \$2 million to buy property.

The 235-page bill and accompanying 345-page spending report were released Monday night and given tentative approval in the Senate Tuesday. If the House goes along, they would then be sent to Gov. Pat McCrory for his consideration.

Mountain Area Health Education Center would get \$8 million to add classroom, office and clinical space at its campus off Hendersonville Road.

Together with \$3 million for administration, faculty and related programs, the money would allow MAHEC to nearly double the number of medical students the agency affiliated with the UNC School of Medicine could educate, said Dr. Jeff Heck, president and CEO.

MAHEC admits up to 24 medical school students each year who spend their third and much of their fourth years of medical school training through MAHEC. Some do their work in Asheville and some elsewhere in the region.

The money sought by Sen. Tom Apodaca, R-Henderson, would allow MAHEC to take up to 44 students each year as well as expand training of other professionals like nurse practitioners, Heck said.

The program is intended to attack a shortage of physicians experienced by every county in the region, he said.

He called the money “a great investment in Western North Carolina.”

Other provisions of the budget deal would:

--Cut tuition at WCU from \$1,946 per semester to \$500 per semester for students from North Carolina and from \$7,143 to \$2,500 for students for other states, beginning in fall 2018.

Tuition at Elizabeth City State University and UNC-Pembroke would also be cut to the same amounts under a proposal also pushed by Apodaca.

Students at all UNC schools would be guaranteed no increase over the tuition charged in their freshman year so long as they complete school in four or five years, depending on their course of study. Annual increases in student fees could be no more than 3 percent. The tuition limit would take effect this fall and the fee cap next year.

The bill says the state will reimburse the state up to \$40 million a year for make up for additional tuition the schools would have collected without the cuts.

--Advance the expiration date of a state law that limits Mission Health's cost increases, operating margins and share of physicians in the area on its payroll. The legislature last year approved ending the law in January 2018. Mission asked that that date be advanced, saying that would keep it from having to pay \$200,000 per year to have a report compiled showing it in compliance.

--Allocate \$3 million for better bathrooms and utility and parking lot improvements at DuPont Forest, the natural area in Henderson and Transylvania counties known for its spectacular waterfalls and extensive trail network.

The forest has seen a dramatic increase in visitation in recent years and there has been discussion of charging an admission fee to cope with the impacts. The money for better facilities and a \$629,335 annual appropriation for nine additional workers, both sought by Rep. Chuck McGrady, R-Henderson, may stop that proposal.

--Reimburse the UNC Asheville Foundation \$2 million for a land purchase near the campus.

--Rename the North Carolina State Veterans Nursing Home in Black Mountain for Zeb Alley, a one-time state senator from Haywood County who had a long career lobbying the General Assembly.

--Set up a process that could lead to conversion of state-owned railroad tracks between Andrews and Murphy into a recreational trail.