

Sales tax would open doors at Durham Tech

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Making the grade | Fourth in a four-part series

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DURHAM — Othela Ngamdi enrolled at Durham Technical Community College because he wanted to continue his education — but also because the school was affordable.

“What I like about Durham Tech is that it is not that expensive,” Ngamdi said. “There are a lot of people like me who can’t afford to go to more expensive schools. There are even a lot of people who can’t afford to go to Durham Tech.”

A “Local Sales and Use Tax Referendum” on the ballot this Election Day is designed, in part, to make sure more students in need can afford to go to the local community college.

The quarter-cent tax, if passed, would bring an estimated \$9.2 million annually to local educational institutions. Durham Tech would get 8.97 percent of that windfall, a projected \$825,000 per year.

That money would be used for Durham Challenge Service Stipends and Challenge Grants, scholarships awarded to local residents who have recently graduated from the Durham Public Schools or who are in need of training or retraining because they are unemployed or underemployed.

The need for the additional funds is far greater today than it has been, pointed out Bill Ingram, the president of Durham Tech.

“Our in-state tuition has increased by 50 percent in the last four years,” Ingram said. “When I first joined the community college system about 25 years ago, about 80 percent of our operational funding came directly from the state. It’s now 60 percent and heading south.”

The combination of reduced state support and the resultant increased tuition “really challenges the community college’s historic access mission,” Ingram added.

The funding that the increased sales tax would provide, he said, “an opportunity for Durham residents, particularly recent high school graduates, to continue their education” at a reasonable cost.

The money from the sales tax that would go to Durham Tech would be divided into two parts.

The Challenge Grants would offer financial support for community college students who are enrolled in health and high-tech programs at DTCC. Because of their heavy course loads, labs and internships, these students frequently cannot take on part-time employment while they are enrolled.

“Without the additional financial support available through the grants, these students would be forced to take out personal loans or maybe drop out or just have to delay their graduation,” said Wanda Maggart, the school’s senior vice president for institutional advancement.

“We think student debt is a bad idea and students should take out loans only as a last alternative. This would help them avoid that.”

Service Stipends will offer a kind of work-study program for Durham Tech students who need and want part-time employment but have not been able to find it — mostly because of limited federal funding — or do not qualify for it.

The stipends also would provide, in addition to financial support, opportunities for students to learn new skills and workplace behaviors and gain work force experience.

Durham Tech administrators say that taken together, the grants and stipends should help at least 300 to 400 students a year at the school.

“Some of these students would simply not be able to enroll without this kind of help,” Maggart said.

The students would have to demonstrate financial need to get the money, and the funding level of their grants or stipends would be based on that demonstrated need.

School officials have no doubt the need is there.

For the current academic year, Durham Tech had 7,599 applications for financial aid. It was able to offer awards to 3,856 students.

“We’re just not able to meet the need,” said Tom Jaynes, the executive dean of student development and support at Durham Tech. “And there are probably a lot of students who realize that and don’t even apply anymore.”

Money raised from the sales tax increase also would go to Durham’s Partnership for Children, to expand early education, and to Durham Public Schools, to save school-based positions and offset the cost of debt service on capital projects.

The referendum is one of two on the ballot, along with a half-cent sales tax that would be used for future regional transit improvements.

The education tax is also for the future, Ingram insisted.

“Yes, we’ll receive immediate benefits,” he acknowledged. “But this is for the future, too, because education is the fundamental infrastructure.”