More money for colleges? Not likely in this budget

By Matt Bittle
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DOVER — Delaware Technical Community College has nearly $80 million in deferred maintenance projects, president Mark Brainard said Wednesday during the state’s annual capital budget hearings.

Appearing in front of the Joint Committee on Capital Improvement, Mr. Brainard detailed the college’s current financial needs, urging legislators to provide more than the recommended sum of $7 million.

DelTech is seeking an additional $5.7 million, which would go toward renovating aging buildings across the college’s four campuses.

Top on the list of priorities is $1.2 million for minor improvements to go with the $400,000 proposed by Gov. Jack Markell as part of January’s budget issuance. General improvements to the various buildings are a must for the college, Mr. Brainard said, as half of the college’s 40 buildings will be at least four decades old in 2020.

While he stressed the importance of additional funding, the likelihood more money is made available for Delaware Tech seems unlikely.

According to the college president, industry standard calls for reinvesting 3 percent into capital projects per year. That would come out to $12 million. Instead, the college has received an average of $4.2 million over the past 10 years — and all of Delaware Tech’s capital money comes from the state.

Over the past six weeks, numerous officials have cited the tight budget situation facing the state, something noted again Wednesday.

That’s driving a push by Sen. Colin Bonini, R-Dover, to broaden the horizon when it comes to higher education funding.

“The way we fund capital improvements in higher education is unsustainable,” he said.

The needs of Delaware’s three public colleges have outstripped available government funding, necessitating the state consider other alternatives, he believes.

Among the ideas he proposed as discussion points include creating a Higher Education Authority, moving revenue from another area and instituting a referendum system for colleges. Currently, state school districts can propose raising property taxes to provide more funds for the district, creating a public vote where local residents can decide if the plan is instituted or not.

“We’ve got to fix this,” he said.

“Would it happen this year? I don’t know. Would it happen next year? I don’t know. But there’s just no question we have to find an alternative method to fund capital improvements in our higher education.”

Rep. Michael Ramone, R-Pike Creek Valley, emphasized the value Delaware Tech brings to the state, noting although the school has grown, the money given to it has not.

Sen. Robert Marshall, D-Wilmington, wondered if state officials had given thought to developing a new trust fund focused almost solely on higher education. In response, Controller General Michael Morton said a discussion along those lines had not been held.

Delaware Tech was not the only institution analyzed by lawmakers on Wednesday, although its hearing was the longest and most involved.

Delaware State University is aiming for about $23 million more than the $7 million recommended for minor improvements, but more crucially, it also wants nearly $29 million to begin the third phase of the Optical Science Center for Applied Research.

A state-of-the-art building designed to focus on science, the lab began construction in 2012.

Phase two started last year. This step would focus on erecting a second structure.

“Well, if we don’t get it, it’d be pushed until we get it,” Noureddine Melkechi, dean of the College of Mathematics, Natural Sciences and Technology, said of the impact of not receiving state funding.

The University of Delaware also appeared before the committee, in what is one of President Patrick Harker’s last appearances in front of lawmakers. He announced Monday he will move to the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia on July 1.

Like Delaware State and Delaware Tech, UD is set to receive $7 million in fiscal year 2016.

“We could always use more, but we understand the state has its constraints and we want to work with the state,” Dr. Harker said.