

Two-Year Colleges Deserve Second Look Statewide

Gov. Phil Bredesen made an eye-opening comment this past March when he met with the editorial board of *The Tennessean*, Nashville's daily newspaper.

He told the board Tennessee has an "upside down" system of higher education in which too many students are in four-year colleges and too few are in community colleges and technology centers.

Dr. Charles Manning, chancellor of the state Board of Regents, agreed with the assessment in his interview with *The Memphis News*.

Manning said the distribution of students in the state's public colleges and universities resembles an upside down pyramid, top-heavy with bachelor's degree candidates. Meanwhile, the actual work force is an upright pyramid comprised of people who may not need four-year degrees.

For several years, Bredesen has put

a renewed emphasis on community colleges. In Perry County, where the unemployment rate is hovering around a Depression era-like 25 percent, he's offered free community college tuition for the unemployed.

Yet the expansion of community colleges and higher education in general remains tied to tuition increases. If community colleges want to expand their reach, too often the only way to do that is to increase their tuition.

A longer reach by these undervalued institutions has never been more critical. If that longer reach is made possible only by continually increasing tuition, it simply puts worthy and striving institutions like our own Southwest Tennessee Community College out of the reach of the very citizens who need what it has to offer.

The over reliance on tuition also promotes an unhealthy competition between the two- and four-year schools.

This is a time when a bridge connecting the two should be reinforced with new lanes in both directions, not manned by border guards and checkpoints.

The technology that now changes our daily lives every few years is changing many elements of our society. That goes for higher education as well.

Tennessee higher education should be about offering the technical training citizens need to get jobs as well as the broader education necessary to foster research and development and the individual intellectual growth that is an incalculable asset.

These are not domains that belong to one type of student and not another. Higher education in Tennessee should change with the times to a revamped, better coordinated system with room for overlapping areas of responsibility that will move closer to the educational outcome needed for economic growth.

The Tennessee Higher Education

Commission should also have adequate staffing to keep up with the growth in for-profit or proprietary schools moving into Tennessee.

Most of the schools appear to be about doing the right thing by their students. But for those that aren't, students pay a high price in money as well as their future for taking the bait.

These schools offer a fast-track education that costs a lot of money. Students who bet student loans and other loans on getting that education could and have taken themselves out of the skilled job market when they lost the bet. They remain behind a financial eight-ball indefinitely.

There are no guarantees in the job market. But the state of Tennessee has an interest in making sure students with a specific goal in job training are given an honest accounting of the difficulty involved in the fast track to the job market. ■

\$7.86 Million Road Project a Waste of Taxpayer Money

BY COUNTY COMMISSIONER MIKE RITZ



Mike Ritz

The current Shelby County construction project to replace 3.5 miles of two-lane Houston Levee Road from the Wolf River Bridge to Macon Road with a nicer two-lane

road has many detractors. I am one of them.

When the project was first brought to the County Commission in 1995, I objected to spending \$7.86 million to replace a two-lane road with a two-lane road. Clearly a four-lane road with left turn lanes at Walnut Grove and Macon was justified.

Prior to that vote, I did my best to point out the futility and waste of tax money this project would and does show.

East of the Interstate 240 loop in Shelby County are only three north-south roads with bridges over the Wolf River. They are Germantown Road, Houston Levee and Collierville-Arlington Road.

Houston Levee south of the Wolf River is now under construction as a six-lane divided roadway. North of U.S. 64, Houston Levee (Canada Road) is a

four-lane road.

The County Commission annually approves a five-year plan for public improvements – roads, buildings, utilities and funding for new schools.

Since 1995 Houston Levee has been listed on the annual capital improvement program as a multilane road from Winchester Road to Interstate 40. The county paid or will pay \$3.73 million toward Houston Levee south of the Wolf River.

The county paid \$1.04 million toward the median-divided four-laning of Canada Road from U.S. 64 north to I-40. The county paid \$1.06 million toward the cost of the new six-lane Houston Levee bridge over the Wolf River.

Where the new two-lane Houston Levee south of Walnut Grove goes through the new Briarcrest Christian School campus and opened up several large properties with new public road access, the county gave \$150,000 to two property owners for the right to build a new road across their land. That gave them road access for future development of their property.

Normally developers contribute right-of-way for roads and road widening to the county as a quid pro quo. They also typically pay 100 percent of the improvements.

In this case, the taxpayers paid the potential developers! The right-of-

way the county acquired is not wide enough for an eventual four-lane road with sidewalks, so the county taxpayers will have to buy more right-of-way later when the four-lane road becomes more needed.

The two-lane road could have been built to one side of the right-of-way so a future median-divided, four-lane roadway could have used the current two-lane road as part of a four-lane road. The county put the two-lane road in the middle of the insufficient right-of-way so the four-lane, median-divided road will require the removal of the \$7.86 million road!

By definition, smart growth is smart. Two lanes and not four lanes is not smart. Not enough right-of-way is not smart, either.

Placement of the road in the right-of-way so it must be torn up for later widening is not smart.

After the county spent \$5.82 million for four- and six-lane roads and bridges on Houston Levee to the north and south of the new two-lane road, was it smart to spend \$7.86 million for a two-lane road to connect the four- and six-lane roads?

As the road is now being built and opened for use, my other commissioner friends may be wishing they had also voted no against this waste of county taxes. ■

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