



January 5, 2015

Legislative Council Study Committee to Review Technical Colleges Ends Quietly with Chair's Letter to Members

The Legislative Council Study Committee on the Review of Technical College Funding and Governance ended quietly when committee members received a letter dated December 22nd from the group's chair, Representative John Nygren, R-Marinette, thanking them for their service.

The letter expressed appreciation to members for their commitment, expertise and effort and stated in part:

“...(A)s our current legislative session is drawing to a close, I regretfully inform you that our study committee also must come to an end. We started an important conversation for this state, gathered input from a wide variety of stakeholders and the public but in the end with scheduling conflicts, the upcoming holidays and the session schedule -- we were unfortunately unable to come to any conclusions.”

This concludes the committee's activities without any report-out or recommendations. While committee members were not specifically expecting an announcement that the committee had ended, it was not likely a surprise as the committee had not met since mid-September.

The study committee began less quietly than it ended.

Legislative Council study committees are comprised of citizens and legislators convened to consider a public policy topic area based on a “scope” statement approved by the Legislature. Members are appointed based on applications. Once up and running, study committees typically request research be conducted and engage expert testimony. They then undertake detailed discussion of the issues. They typically discuss how current state policy/law meets the state's interests in the issue area and whether any legislation is recommended to further address public needs in the study area. Finally, Legislative Council committees may then draft and directly introduce legislation as a committee for consideration in the coming session.

This study, however, was unique in that it was initially proposed with a scope statement that presupposed a desired course of action for the committee. Rather than asking a committee to consider technical college governance and funding generally, the scope statement presumed the study would proceed “in the interest” of eliminating local governance and “with a preference” for ending local tax revenue as a source of technical college funding. The complete scope statement read as follows:

“The Special Committee is directed to review the current governance model of the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) in the interest of transferring governance responsibilities of local district boards to the state WTCS Board and examine the current funding model for the WTCS with a preference toward reassigning current local property tax revenue to a broader state tax source.”

The Committee met only twice and spent almost the entire course of the meetings hearing from invited speakers. The committee did not engage in any significant discussion about identifying or shaping the issues to be considered. Members did ask the invited speakers several questions. These questions generated the bulk of members’ overall open discussion during the two meetings.

The first meeting took place on July 24, 2014, for approximately 5 hours and included testimony by legislative support staff plus:

- WTCS President Morna Foy and Board President Drew Petersen;
- Melanie Holmes, Chair, Milwaukee Area Technical College Board (former vice president, Manpower Group) and Dave Minor, Member and former Chair, Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College District Board (President/CEO, The Chamber, Superior and Douglas County);
- Joe Murray, Director of Political and Governmental Affairs, Wisconsin Realtors Association;
- Todd Berry, President, Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance;
- Michael Birkley, Legislative Director, Wisconsin Taxpayers, Inc.;
- Jason Culotta, Director of Tax and Transportation Policy, and Chris Reader, Director of Health and Human Resources Policy, Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce; and
- Josh Dukelow, Vice President, Public Policy and Leadership, Fox Cities Chamber of Commerce.

An August meeting was cancelled. The second and final committee meeting took place on September 18, 2014, for approximately 3 hours and included testimony by legislative staff and:

- Pauline Jaske, President and CEO of Fairway Transit, Pewaukee, Chairperson of the WCTC District Board and a member and former Chair of the Waukesha County Board;
- Aims McGuiness, Senior Associate, National Center for Higher Education Management Systems; and
- John Mielke, President, Associated Builders and Contractors of Wisconsin.

Across the two meetings, most of the testimony was very positive. It largely recognized technical colleges' responsiveness and positive outcomes. Several of the presenters focused on the local nature of technical colleges and linked local governance and funding to the colleges' responsiveness and outcomes.

Some speakers called for the Legislature to pursue additional general property tax reforms (Wisconsin Realtors Association), or to specifically eliminate the technical college local taxing authority (Wisconsin Property Taxpayers, Inc.). Two presenters raised the question of whether "appointed" college boards should have taxing authority (Wisconsin Property Taxpayers, Inc. and the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance). Todd Berry of the Taxpayers Alliance raised the question rhetorically. Mike Birkley of Wisconsin Property Taxpayers, Inc., raised it directly.

After meetings such as these, most Legislative Council study groups typically discuss what they've heard and begin to shape any legislative initiatives on a consensus basis. It is not at all typical that a Legislative Council study committee would simply end without discussion after two meetings, but there is also no requirement that the committee continue or take formal action to disband.

The committee's members are to be commended for their willingness to take time from their busy schedules to serve. The membership included exceptionally broad and deep expertise ranging from college presidents and board members to business and education leaders. The complete membership included:

- Representative John Nygren (R-Marinette), Chair
- Senator Sheila Harsdorf (R-River Falls), Vice Chair
- Senator Jennifer Shilling (D-La Crosse)
- Representative Debra Kolste (D-Janesville)
- Representative Cory Mason (D-Racine)
- Representative Tom Weatherston (R-Racine)
- **Bruce Barker**, President, Chippewa Valley Technical College
- Allen Buechel, County Executive, Fond du Lac County
- Dan Conroy, Vice President, Human Resources, Nexen Group, Inc., Webster
- **David Dull**, President/CEO, Allis Roller, LLC, Franklin (Member, Milwaukee Area Technical College District Board)
- **Stephen Kohler**, Director of Human Resources, Pierce Manufacturing, Inc., Appleton (Member and Vice Chair, Fox Valley Technical College District Board)
- **Susan May**, President, Fox Valley Technical College
- **Joe Sheehan**, Superintendent of Schools, Sheboygan Area School District (Member, Lakeshore Technical College District Board)
- David Stark, President, Stark Company Realtors, Fitchburg
- **Dennis Treu**, Broker/Owner, Century 21 Gold Award Homes, Sparta (Member and Board Treasurer, Western Technical College District Board)
- **Mark Tyler**, President, OEM Fabricators, Inc., Woodville (Member and Past President, Wisconsin Technical College System Board)

Analysis and Conclusion

In the end, the committee's lack of conclusions or recommendations represents a paradox. The committee reached an entirely appropriate conclusion despite not affirmatively discussing or agreeing upon on that outcome.

On one hand, the committee began an important discussion about why technical colleges have been locally governed and funded for 103 years (and how local funding and governance are inseparable from college responsiveness and outcomes). On the other hand, legislation is only warranted when there is a clear gap between the public interest and existing law. Despite a scope statement that presumed an interest in legislative changes from the start, and despite the committee's truncated discussion, the end result (no proposed legislation) supports the public interest better than would any other outcome.

The issues of local technical college levy authority and local board governance will continue to be of interest to the Legislature in the 2015-2016 session. More than 275 business leaders, chambers of commerce and economic development groups have already written to their legislators opposing erosion of local technical college funding and governance. These letters describe how the colleges respond to them and support their business success. The letters assert that this responsiveness is driven by local funding and governance. It will remain extremely important for business and community partners to continue telling this story with us. Their input clearly answers any questions left hanging by the Legislative Council study committee.

To see a record of the Legislative Council study committee's meetings, see:

<https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lc/study/2014/1193>

This report was prepared by Paul Gabriel for members of the Wisconsin Technical College District Boards Association. Any opinion or analysis in this report is exclusively the author's.