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WSU officials hold roundtable at SVC

Focus is on education choices university could offer in the area

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Washington State University officials visited Skagit Valley College on Thursday night to have a conversation with locals regarding the education choices the university could offer in the region.

The university is slated to manage University Center of North Puget Sound, which offers courses from universities across the state from the Everett Community College campus.

The university is using these conversations to form its strategic plan, due December 2012 to the state legislature under provisions of the bill which would allow the university to assume management of the center in 2014. The university would offer bachelor and graduate degree programs to students who have earned their two-year transfer degree.

“Washington State University and North Puget Sound — I think it’s a natural,” said Paul E. Pitre, the special assistant to the President of WSU for academic affairs in North Puget Sound. The region already includes the university’s extension offices and research centers, and the community around the center was interested in having four-year degree opportunities, he said.

According to legislative documents, studies have confirmed that, compared to demand, enrollment in higher education in north Puget Sound, especially for upper-division courses, is lower than enrollment in other parts of Washington state.

“Here in this community, it’s really about making sure we identify those programs which are important to you,” WSU President Elson S. Floyd said. “Aerospace is one of those areas, specifically engineering. Mechanical engineering and electrical engineering would be two of the educational offerings we would provide.”

Providing access to education in aerospace-related fields is another requirement for the university to assume leadership of the center.

“With the governor’s very ambitious proposal — that is generally referred to as Pegasus — it would then put 60 additional students in this community in engineering that will then go down to everyone’s benefit,” Floyd said, referring to Governor Chris Gregoire’s program to keep Boeing jobs, which included proposals to the legislature for an increase in aerospace education.

A broad swath of university officials, representing fields from engineering to hospitality, spoke of their visions for the center and responded to questions Thursday. Locals at the meeting cited a need for reinvigorating interest in agriculture and offering educational opportunities in the field.

“I really worry how we’re connecting high school students to the agricultural industry,” said Sedro-Woolley School District superintendent Mark Venn. “Our kids don’t see agriculture as a viable-wage, living industry in the high school now.”

Skagit County Commissioner Ken Dahlstedt talked of a need for “rapid response re-training” and how the nature of careers are changing.

No longer are people getting degrees and staying in one job for thirty years, Dahlstedt said; instead job changes are getting more common.

“How can the university fit in by helping people get retrained and get the degrees necessary to meet the new jobs?” Dahlstedt said.

Others expressed concern with transportation and the need for distancelearning opportunities. University officials responded that hybrid programs — with on-site classes, classes taught by a professor through a video feed, and

online courses — could be options.

The university already offers degree programs at Olympic College in Bremerton that utilize distance learning. Accessibility is a major goal, officials said.

“This particular region has not had as much service with graduate and undergraduate degree programs, so I’m excited to work with you,” Pitre said as the meeting ended.

University officials will continue to hold town hall meetings throughout the region to get suggestions from residents. “Conversation, connection and collaboration” was reiterated by many of the officials throughout the evening.

“It’s going to be a combination of Washington State University, the community and the legislature for how we do this,” Pitre said.

The University Center of North Puget Sound grew from state legislation which formed the North Snohomish-Island-Skagit Consortium of higher education institutions in 1997. The consortium was created to expand access to higher education in those counties and access to residents who needed to stay close to home for their jobs or family reasons while they earned their degree.

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WSU President Elson S. Floyd.