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Rothman pitches $32 million workforce plan as UW seeks release of funds

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Universities of Wisconsin President Jay Rothman said a new $32 million proposal will "go some ways" toward addressing the state's workforce needs as UW seeks to recoup money GOP lawmakers cut from its budget over diversity, equity and inclusion efforts.

"The investments we make today, or fail to make, will define Wisconsin's future," Rothman told reporters yesterday.

The plan seeks to invest the money to boost graduation in four key areas, including engineering and health care.

Joint Finance Committee Co-chair Sen. Howard Marklein told WisPolitics he likes the proposal's emphasis on "engineering, nursing, healthcare, business, finance, technology and other high-demand fields."

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"As with any request, we will do our homework and determine what the additional resources will mean to our campuses," the Spring Green Republican added.

The proposal, which the Board of Regents plans to take up this week, comes as Assembly Speaker Robin Vos has vowed not to give the UW another nickel until DEI positions are eliminated or position authority is returned to the Legislature.

The budget GOP lawmakers approved this summer cut $32 million from the UW budget, but placed it in the Joint Finance Committee's supplemental appropriation. The budget required the university to submit a plan to spend the money on

workforce development before it could be released.

Rothman said while he continues to have conversations with Vos, “I have to believe that everyone in the state of Wisconsin would see this as being in the best interest of our state.”

Vos did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the proposal.

Under the plan, UW-Madison and UW-Milwaukee would receive just less than $5 million each over the biennium. The remaining 11 campuses would receive $2 million each, or $22 million over the biennium.

The money would be allocated toward four areas: engineering, nursing/healthcare, business/finance and computer/data science. Rothman said the plan would increase graduates in those areas by more than 9,300 in five years.

See the workforce plan in the Board of Regents’ Business and Finance Committee agenda here.

Meanwhile, UW-Madison announced a campaign pushing lawmakers to invest in a new engineering building after Republicans rejected the proposal in Gov. Tony Evers’ capital budget.

The campaign includes digital ads in online publications, websites and other social media platforms, newspaper placements, and a video spot to highlight Wisconsin businesses’ support for the proposal. The university also has a web page, initially launched in 2020, calling for Wisconsinites to contact their legislators to approve the “urgently needed” project.

UW-Madison Director of Strategic Partnerships Communications and Marketing Rodee Schneider told WisPolitics the ads were paid for with Wisconsin Alumni Association funds and the total amount spent has yet to be determined.

When Republicans rejected the project in June, Joint Finance Co-chair Mark Born, R-Beaver Dam, defended the GOP capital budget, saying what Evers proposed was “unrealistic.” He noted the $2.3 billion GOP capital budget is still the largest in at least two decades.

“Like many things, it becomes the job of this committee to right-size it,” Born said. “Right-sizing it this time is still a historic investment that will invest in a number of

great projects."

UW-Madison over the weekend took out full-page ads in seven Wisconsin newspapers as part of the campaign featuring a letter from 42 Wisconsin CEOs calling for the GOP-led Legislature to approve the building.

The building is projected to cost $347 million, with $150 million to be provided through private donations. The CEOs warned delaying the proposal could put private donations at risk.

"We understand that more than $100 million in gifts has already been pledged from donors, contingent on state support of the project this session," they wrote. "Delaying this project to the next state budget would increase the total cost to approximately $400 million, with no guarantee that donor funds will still be available."

UW-Madison Vice Chancellor Charles Hoslet in a statement said the need for an engineering building is "undeniable."

"The response from the business community has been crystal clear: Wisconsin's economic growth and innovation rely heavily on a skilled engineering workforce, and this project is crucial for the state's continued prosperity," Hoslet said.

See the UW-Madison release here.
See the newspaper ad here.
See some of the other ads here and here.
See the web page here.