

The Auraria lifeline

Desperately needed science building may yet be saved

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Legislative leaders and Gov. Bill Ritter announced a two-fer on Tuesday that should - if approved - ensure a more adequate stream of funding for higher education capital projects while saving a new science building on the Auraria campus in Denver.

The process that led to this deal was unnecessary, however. Its separate components - funding the science building along with changes in the way Colorado spends federal mineral lease revenues - are worthwhile in their own right and should have prevailed without linking their fate.

Now the science building's future may depend on the ability of lawmakers to rein in a source of discretionary funding that's coveted by local governments.

Under Tuesday's deal, Colorado would issue \$150 million in "certificates of participation" - a form of debt - to underwrite capital spending for higher ed. The first recipient: the Auraria Science Building, which needs another \$60 million in public money.

Before issuing those COPs, however, the legislature has to be able to repay them. That's where reforms in federal mineral lease revenues come in. The state collected \$144 million from energy production on federal land in 2006, and revenues may soon surge past \$250 million a year.

We backed the original bipartisan reform plan in February. In a nutshell, it would guarantee current funding from energy production for K-12 schools, impacted local communities and other local programs. But a substantial share of tens of millions in expected surplus revenues were targeted for higher education operations and capital needs.

Under Tuesday's deal, up to \$10 million in surplus revenues annually would repay the COPs - if the mineral lease reforms become law.

The COPs would allow the completion of not only the Auraria Science Building, but also other capital projects that were shelved last week after a disappointing revenue forecast. The Auraria project was slated to get an additional \$37.5 million for the 2008-09 budget cycle; that funding would allow the building to open by the fall 2009 semester.

As recently as Feb. 28, the science building was the No. 4 capital priority of the Colorado Commission on Higher Education and was ranked 18th among all state projects by the legislature. Paying for the science building and the 17 projects above it would cost \$173 million. That's less than the \$188 million allowed for capital spending in the Long Bill published last week.

But last week budget writers moved more than a dozen lower-priority (and yes, less-expensive) projects above the Auraria Science Building; five of those less-urgent projects were at other higher-ed institutions.

The science building deserved funding even after the lower revenue projection. The ventilation system in the current 1970s building is so antiquated that at times warning signs have been posted urging students who are pregnant or nursing to not take classes so they don't breathe the fumes.

Nor can current lab facilities accommodate students enrolled in science classes. Metropolitan State College President Stephen Jordan says that some 2,000 Auraria students have had to complete their lab classes at the Health Sciences Center or some other campus because Auraria labs were overbooked.

Students enrolled in basic science classes at Auraria deserve adequate laboratory facilities. Their aspirations must not be denied by the cities and counties that want to keep their energy windfall, not to mention the shifting priorities of state lawmakers.