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Miami Dade College seeks local sales tax hike to shore up its finances

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After years of state budget cuts, Miami Dade College would like to ask local voters to approve a half-cent sales-tax increase that could help shore up the college's finances.

Twice in previous years, Florida's staunchly anti-tax Legislature has refused to allow a Miami-Dade referendum on additional money for MDC. Now, state lawmakers will consider the issue a third time, as lawmakers have filed referendum bills in both the House and Senate.

If approved by the Legislature — and later by voters — Miami-Dade's sales tax would rise to 7.5 cents, and MDC would receive about \$185 million a year in additional funding. The college has lost about one-quarter of its per-student state funding since the 2007-08 academic year, and MDC President Eduardo Padrón said the additional dollars are sorely needed.

"You have buildings that are getting very old," Padrón said. "Roofs that are having problems, you have elevators that have stopped working ... a well-documented set of needs."

In addition to repairs and renovations, MDC also says it needs money for new buildings that would house its Workforce Development Programs. Those buildings include a Fire Academy at North Campus, an Architecture/Engineering building at Kendall Campus, and a Health & STEM Center in Homestead.

MDC also wants to invest in the technology it uses to deliver online classes, college officials said.

The bill now floating through the GOP-dominated Legislature is sponsored by two Miami-Dade Republicans, Rep. Erik Fresen and Sen. Anitere Flores.

"I believe there is a good chance this bill will pass," Flores said in an e-mail. She noted that this year's bill requires the creation of an oversight board that would make sure MDC spends the money wisely — a safeguard that didn't exist in prior years. Flores added that she has had "very productive and encouraging conversations" with Senate legislative leaders.

Having Republican sponsors certainly helps the bill's chances, but success is hardly guaranteed.

In 2009, the objections of a single Republican lawmaker from Broward, then-state Rep. Ellyn Bogdanoff, effectively killed the bill. Bogdanoff refused to hear the bill in her Finance and Tax Council, making it impossible for the MDC measure to receive a full House vote. Adding to the pain of that legislative defeat: The bill had passed the state Senate on a unanimous vote.

This year, the absence of Bogdanoff (she lost a state Senate election last year) has given MDC leaders a bit more optimism. Under the current version of the bill, MDC would be eligible to receive the sales tax money for 10 years. Local voters would have to approve the sales tax hike, but Miami-Dade voters have demonstrated a pattern of supporting MDC.

In 2008, for example, more than 61 percent of Miami-Dade voters supported a proposed constitutional amendment to allow sales tax increases for community colleges. The amendment failed to get enough votes in other parts of the state to pass. MDC's student body of more than 174,000 means that many Miami-Dade families have at least one current or former MDC student.

"Everybody would tell you Miami Dade College is a premier community college in the state, if not in the nation," said Miami-Dade County Commissioner Juan Zapata, himself an MDC graduate. As a state lawmaker, Zapata sponsored the MDC sales tax bill in 2009, and he even bought Bogdanoff a chocolate cake with the bill number written on it.

"She ate the cake," Zapata recalled. "She didn't hear the bill."