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< >

Home / News

http://www.bgdailynews.com/news/wku-president-makes-the-case-for-steady-funding-to-lawmakers/article_646d160f-129a-5e4f-a28f-aa84b5fa2656.html

TOP STORY

WKU president makes the case for steady funding to lawmakers

AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com 16 hrs ago

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FRANKFORT — Speaking Thursday to House lawmakers, Western Kentucky University President Timothy Caboni made the case for “stable and predictable funding” from the state for higher education.

“Over the last decade, state funding has been down in most years,” he said. “At best state support has been sporadic and unstable and certainly not a predictable budget source for us.”

Caboni’s presentation to members of the House Budget Review Subcommittee on Postsecondary Education follows a budget proposal from Gov. Matt Bevin. President Michael Benson of Eastern Kentucky University and President Jay Box of the Kentucky Community and Technical College System also spoke to lawmakers during the meeting.

Under Bevin’s plan, which still needs to be passed by the legislature, most of the state government would experience a 6.25 percent reduction in spending. It would result in a \$4.6 million cut for WKU and the elimination of funding for the Kentucky Mesonet, a statewide weather network of 69 weather stations.

When accounting for a current budget shortfall of about \$15 million, a pension increase of \$7,263,300, the proposed decrease in state funding of \$4,619,000 and eliminating \$750,000 in Mesonet funding, in total WKU’s budget deficit amounts to \$27,632,300.

“The question that we’re asking ourselves today is what are the good things that we’re doing now that we can no longer afford to do,” Caboni told the group, which included Rep. Jim DeCesare, R-Bowling Green, and Rep. Jody Richards, D-Bowling Green. Neither of those lawmakers is seeking re-election.

Caboni said cuts would result in “some significant job loss,” at the university. He told lawmakers he wasn’t prepared to say which jobs will be reduced or eliminated.

“We’ve managed through a net loss of about \$11.2 million in our state appropriation,” said Caboni, who used several charts conveying budget information. “You can see we began in fiscal year 2009 with state funding of about \$80 million. That was about 25 percent of our total budget. This year we’ll end without about \$74 million from the state, which means state funding will represent only about 18 percent of the total budget.”

Despite an attempt from the state to equalize the funding WKU receives compared to other universities, Caboni said “our funding per full-time equivalent student is still declining.”

“We’re, at best, flat over a 20-year period since the passage of higher education reform,” he said.

Caboni also noted that WKU has increased the number of graduates it has produced by 57 percent since 1999.

“In sheer numbers, we’ve essentially doubled our degree production, which contributes substantially to Kentucky’s workforce and the overall quality of life,” Caboni said, noting that as state funding remains flat, students end up paying more.

Caboni outlined work being carried out by the university’s Budget Council, which is working out how to manage through the \$15 million shortfall.

“The report’s due in a few weeks, and by the beginning of March we’ll begin the difficult and grueling task of reducing our workforce,” he said.

Once the state budget is passed, Caboni said the council will go through the process again, which could mean additional job losses and also program eliminations.

Caboni also outlined efforts to develop a new strategic plan for the university to align its budget with its strategic priorities. He also described efforts to develop a new budget model to be put in place by the fall of 2020.

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Caboni also briefly described WKU's Mesonet weather station network, which was originally created with federal funds and continues with a combination of federal grants, one-time university funding from year to year and local government support.

Each of the stations was built with matching funds from local fiscal courts, school boards and community partners, Caboni said, adding that some even set aside land and site preparation.

"These are true partnerships," he said, adding the stations are valued by local officials, farmers, meteorologists, emergency management officials and others. "The real-time data that we provide on the weather is used to improve local forecasts, severe weather warnings, it helps with emergency response efforts, enhances agricultural productivity and ultimately supports business and industry."

Given all that, Caboni told lawmakers that "what we need most from you is stable and predictable funding. No organization, no business, could work without knowing how its budget would be created and funded year to year."

Following his presentations, lawmakers were given the chance to ask questions or comment.

Richards asked about the community partnerships that make the Mesonet network viable.

Caboni stressed the buy-in from communities, including partners who have set aside land and helped create fencing. He stressed those partnerships as vital to the university's mission.

“For me, turning our backs on that is difficult,” he said.

“This is an issue of public safety in Kentucky,” DeCesare said, urging lawmakers to think about its value.

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Aaron Mudd

Education reporter. Covers education and related issues, focusing primarily on the Bowling Green and Warren County public school districts and Western Kentucky University.

