

## Let local voters decide

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With almost 2 million alumni since it opened its doors, Miami Dade College has morphed from the “little engine that could” to the region’s economic development engine in its own right.

The “People’s College” has grown from a two-year institution in the 1960s to a four-year college offering degrees in hundreds of key fields, from education to nursing to biological sciences — all intended to fill jobs in our community. Working with area businesses, MDC has fulfilled the dreams of generations and has become the largest state college in the nation with 174,000 students attending its various campuses each year.

MDC has suffered more than most from the impact of the Great Recession. State universities have faced dramatic cuts, too, but they had some wiggle room to increase fees and set limits on student enrollment. MDC, by contrast, is an open college, which by state law must give access to all students.

Yet since 2007-08 — as more out-of-work residents looked to MDC to enroll in certificate programs to increase their skills or to get a four-year degree — MDC has lost 25 percent in state funding for fulltime students. Overall, the state has cut 14 percent out of MDC’s budget since 2007-08 and it shows. Its buildings need \$350 million in repairs. And growth demands from Hialeah to Homestead mean that MDC needs \$1.2 billion for more classrooms, labs and technology.

So what can be done?

Lawmakers in Tallahassee can start by giving county voters the opportunity to decide if MDC merits short-term help by targeting revenue from a half-penny sales tax increase to finance construction and technology projects and hire more professors in key fields. The GOP-controlled Legislature has never given Miami-Dade voters the chance to decide their own future — it has rejected local MDC bills twice, which seems odd for a party that views local control as the ideal.

On Wednesday House and Senate committees will consider the local-option bill, a key component for this area’s Workforce Development Programs and the One Community One Goal focus on training workers for the jobs we need to diversify our economy. The legislation, sponsored by Miami-Dade Republican Sen. Anitere Flores and Rep. Erik Fresen, does not raise the sales tax.

All it does is give local voters the chance to decide if there should be a temporary half penny increase for 10 years to help fund MDC. It protects taxpayers by requiring a community oversight board that would ensure MDC spends the money efficiently.

In 2008, a constitutional amendment asked voters statewide if they would support a local vote to raise the sales tax for community colleges. Sixty-one percent of Miami-Dade voters said Yes! Miami-Dade was the only county that passed the 60 percent threshold required for a constitutional amendment to be enacted — a testament to the work it has done.

Consider that Florida's 28 public colleges pump \$26.6 billion into the state's economy each year, according to a new study by Economic Modeling Specialists International. No surprise that the study found that MDC boosts our local economy by \$3.3 billion annually. Imagine what it could do if funding was stable.

MDC is one of the most valuable contributors to the educational vitality and economic wellbeing of Miami-Dade County. Voters who live here deserve the opportunity to make it even stronger, if they so choose. The Legislature should let them have that choice.