

Joint Appropriations Subcommittee on Long Range Planning
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Testimony by
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Mr. Chairman, members of the committee. My name is Chris Dimock. I am President of a growing Montana telecommunications business, Chair of the National Advisory Board of the MSU-B COT and have first hand experience in regional economic development as Chair of the Big Sky Economic Development Corporation.

I rise in support of House Bill 540.

I have been involved in economic development efforts in the Yellowstone County region for over five years. In that time I have seen a number of companies look toward Billings as a relocation alternative, and look away. One of the consistent themes they express is a concern about opportunities for workforce development. In our recent success in attracting Bresnan Communications Operation Center to Billings, the participation of the COT as a resource for workforce training played a vital role in their decision.

As I have talked to businesses throughout our region, one of the things which rapidly becomes evident is that there is a demand for well trained employees who do not need a baccalaureate degree. I have heard time and again that businesses could employ over ten times the number of students that the MSU-B COT currently graduates from its programs.

Students of programs like Process Plant, Nursing and Fire Science are snapped up at a rate of nearly 96% by the time they graduate, and those are students working in their chosen field. Many of the remaining 4% are continuing on for a four year degree, or have found a job in a different field. The vast majority of these graduates stay in the region, which is a great benefit for local employers who are looking to hire dependable staff with roots in the area.

The MSU-B COT serves another purpose as well. The programs at the COT meet the needs of the businesses that make up the backbone of the economy. These are companies like the dozens of auto repair shops throughout our region. These shops all have similar requirements for trained staff, but they do not have the capacity to underwrite the cost of developing programs collectively, as may be the case in an industry represented by a few larger players. Were it not for the COT, these training needs would largely go unmet.

I understand that there are some conflicts in priorities. It seems that the Board of Regents priorities were established before the Shared Leadership Initiative helped to focus higher education on its current goals. Just speaking as a business person, I have always believed that you put your resources into your greatest opportunity, and an investment in two year education is clearly as close to a guaranteed return as I have seen in higher education. Whereas I cannot comment on competing priorities, I do know an under-served need when I see one!

These are few funding alternatives for a College of Technology. In a time when much of our Board discussion revolves around the need for transformational improvements, if the State Legislature does not step to the funding plate, then who will?

I urge your strong support to preserve the funding for two year education in the state of Montana.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.