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Our schools: N.Y. is investing in building colleges, building economy

(April 28, 2005) —

By Albert Simone and Gary Squires

The new state budget makes a timely, important investment in independent colleges and universities that will create a significant economic stimulus for upstate communities. Equally important, the new Higher Education Capital Facilities Matching Grant Program expands the historic partnership between independent higher education and state government. It reflects a broad coalition including colleges and universities, labor interests, the building and construction industry and state elected officials. Together, we were collectively able to talk about this program's potential economic impact. This legislation's passage is proof positive that collaboration and unanimity can advance state and community priorities.

We applaud Gov. George Pataki, Senate Majority Leader Joe Bruno and Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver for their commitment to making this program a reality. Likewise, Rochester-area Senate and Assembly members deserve appreciation for effectively advocating for this important initiative.

Over the next four years, this initiative will generate \$600 million in construction on independent college and university campuses statewide. The state will provide one-fourth of the total: \$150 million. Every \$1 in state funds must be matched by \$3 in private funds raised by the colleges and universities.

In greater Rochester, the 10 area colleges and universities are eligible to receive nearly \$13 million in state funds, which will leverage at least an added \$39 million for a baseline total of \$52 million in construction projects. This program will enable us to leverage matching funds from out-of-state donors, foundations and corporations. This program is an investment in our economic future and is particularly important in the Rochester region, which has identified higher education as a key economic driver.

In addition, the building and construction industry is a critical bellwether of the economy, providing well-paid jobs for highly skilled local workers and generating a multiplier effect on other community segments. The emphasis that our local building trades place on education and training made this collaborative effort with the area colleges and universities a natural fit.

In recent years, New York state has become a leading destination for students who attend college outside their home state. At the Rochester Institute of Technology, for example, 50 percent of the incoming freshman class over the past several years has come from outside our state. Competition for these students, many of whom are also recruited by top universities nationwide, is fierce and growing. To continue to draw them, we must be able to offer the highest-caliber academic and student life experience.

The new Higher Education Capital Facilities Program will also facilitate our ability to introduce new academic programs by providing the resources for high-tech classrooms, laboratories and other infrastructure. For example, among the RIT projects that could qualify for these funds are a new telecommunications building and an expansion of the Gleason engineering building to enhance the university's engineering curriculum.

These kinds of facilities are an important part of our region's economic development, as corporate site selectors identify proximity to academic institutions (and the work force and R&D opportunities they represent)

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as a key factor in their decision process.

With 10 independent colleges in the region, this new program provides a unique and timely opportunity to further leverage this strategic asset. These dollars will attract new funding and create a critical stimulus for construction and renovation. It is the right time and the right investment.

Simone is president, Rochester Institute of Technology; Squires is chairman, UNICON (Unions and Businesses United in Construction).

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