

Fund UNCC project for energy future

BY PHILIP L. DUBOIS
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As rising gas prices dominate the headlines and demands for clean, inexpensive fuel increase, the N.C. General Assembly meets to debate a budget for the UNC system. Funding for a construction project at UNC Charlotte that will help address the regional, national and global need for energy hangs in the balance.

Demand for energy in the U.S. is expected to grow by more than 30 percent by 2030. Major power companies, like Duke Energy, and construction partners like AREVA, Parsons and Shaw Group, will play a central role in responding to this demand. Industry leaders look to



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UNCC to help address a critical shortage in the intellectual capital necessary to modernize energy production operations and develop alternative energy sources. Recognizing an opportunity for long-term collaboration that would benefit the community and industry, UNCC proposed to create the Energy Production and Infrastructure Center (EPIC).

Help for labor shortage

EPIC will address the severe shortage of trained engineers capable of servicing and replacing an aging fossil fuel and nuclear infrastructure, as well as developing future infrastructures for wind, solar, and biofuels.

Reasons for the labor shortage are two-fold: 1) With more than 25 percent of the working population approaching retirement, the "graying of the workforce" has acutely impacted engineering fields. 2) The attrition of older professionals is exacerbated by a lack of students majoring in energy-related fields.

Few new power production facilities were built in the U.S. in recent decades, so hiring in energy-related fields slowed. Universities scaled back programs aimed at educating skilled professionals for the industry.

EPIC will dramatically increase the region's supply of trained engineers, as well as assure the efficiency and reliability of the next generation of power plants and distribution systems.

Retention research indicates that students with ties to the community are more likely to remain in the Charlotte region; engineers educated locally will seek employment locally. That's good news for our burgeoning energy production sector, the regional economy, and the greater community. Opportunities for internships with industry leaders will attract promising young talent, allowing the seamless transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next.

Capital funds needed

To make the EPIC vision a reality, the General Assembly must allocate the required capital funds. The legislature appropriated \$19 million in planning and site development funds for the EPIC building last year, and we are already well into the design process. We have requested the remaining \$57 million in construction funds as our highest budgetary priority in the current budget session.

I urge the General Assembly to fully fund this project, which will allow private industry to prosper and bring high-paying jobs and international recognition to the Charlotte region.

Philip L. Dubois is chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.