

COCC bond is crucial for our future

By [John Costa](#) / *The Bulletin*

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If you haven't already, you are about to get a ballot in the mail asking you to support a new bond for Central Oregon Community College.

Please support it.

Yes, we are in a god-awful recession, which to many means it is the very worst time to be saying yes to new public investment.

And on many tax issues I would agree.

But not this one.

In fact, I think there has never been a more important — if not better — time to invest in COCC.

No question about it, times are very tight. The job market is terrible, and many people are struggling to make ends meet.

We can't change the immediate impacts of this recession on Central Oregon. We'll live through it and be better on the other side. But we have to look beyond our current distress.

We have to take steps — even in this downturn — to better position our region against the challenges of the next recession, which is as sure to occur as the recovery of this one.

One step is to agree to chip in \$2 a month — on a \$200,000 home — to expand substantially the educational opportunities at COCC.

For that very small commitment, the college would have a bigger and more effective presence in Bend, Redmond, Madras and Prineville.

Additions would include a health and science center in Bend and a technology education center in Redmond. In Madras and Prineville, the new facilities would provide classrooms, administrative space (counseling, financial aid, etc.) and areas that could be available to other agencies.

The tax would go on our bills next year, with construction to start in 2010 and be completed by 2012.

For a number of reasons, all of this is critical to our future.

Enrollment during the past two years — the period of this recession — has jumped more than 45 percent. The college simply can't squeeze in all the people who want a better shot at the world and more security the next time we face a downturn.

These are our sons, daughters, spouses, significant others, friends and colleagues, whether current, former or future.

They are asking for and need our help. I think that is worth two bucks a month.

Let's be honest, for all its marvelous advancement, Central Oregon is disproportionately dependent on a single industry — building and real estate.

The area is more diversified than it has ever been, and the real estate/building industry, which is suffering worldwide, will always be critical to us, as it should be. It has been a great contributor.

But the next time we go through bleak days like these, our region will be far better off if there is a broader array of companies paying good wages.

There is no better way to attract companies to add to our employment and wage base, and further diversify the economy, than to add heft to our higher education offerings.

These kinds of companies want highly educated workers and opportunity for educational advancement for their employees. I think that is worth two bucks a month.

We should also keep in mind that we have a very fragile branch of Oregon State University.

OSU President Ed Ray has said he wants 3,000 to 4,000 full-time students at the campus by 2025. He didn't have to say "or else." It's implicit.

The branch now has 600 students. Where are the next 2,500 to 3,500 students going to come from?

Many places, it is hoped. But one significant source is COCC. As it expands its array of offerings, the pool of potential students, seeking to move on to undergraduate and advanced degrees through the branch, deepens.

So, yes, this bond is directly about COCC, but it is also profoundly about the future of the OSU branch.

If that isn't worth two bucks a month, I don't know what is.

Folks, this isn't even a close one.

Yes, times are very tough.

But without the opportunity to better train for the future, they could go from tough to hopeless.

Let's not let that happen.

John Costa is editor in chief of The Bulletin.