

College, Arvin community to discuss future BC site

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For years, Arvin-area residents argue, they've waited for better access to higher education. Case in point: students from the area now must take three busing systems one way to attend classes at Bakersfield College's main campus.

College officials said they would help. College courses have been offered in Arvin and in November, officials debated publicly where to put a college center for the area.

Five months later, the debate continues strong. College officials are recommending a center be built outside of Arvin to cater to all potential southern Kern students, while a small, vocal group in Arvin is arguing for a campus in the city center.

On Thursday, the people of Arvin will meet face to face with Kern Community College District leaders, board members and BC officials on their home court.

It will be their goal to convince district officials and trustees to focus more on Arvin education and ultimately choose to build a center there, said Jim Young, a leader of the Arvin campus movement and a former KCCCD chancellor.

He has said the campus could "literally transform Arvin," which is among the least educated community in Kern County and the state.

District and college leaders are vouching for a campus on district-owned land at Highway 99 and Bear Mountain Boulevard, which enrollment projections show would cater to more students in the area than one in Arvin, college reports show.

And while current state budget uncertainty leaves either option in limbo for now, the sides know something must be put in place soon. All parties are in agreement -- students in the rural towns southeast of Bakersfield need better access to higher education.

"We all have a commitment for students in south Kern," said Greg Chamberlain, BC president.

DEBATE UPDATE

In November, district trustees heard from Young and Arvin city officials. More recently, Young brought in Arvin High students and staff to speak with trustees, as well as officials from Building Healthy Communities, a group that aims to improve the health of South Kern's youth.

That group, along with The California Endowment, has pledged \$2 million in a 10-year span to kick start an

Arvin college center.

Last month, Young blasted the district and college for not showing a commitment to the area as it had promised before. The college, he said, did not publicize courses available, and then closed classes for lack of enrollment. In past years, when it did advertise, classes filled and students were on waitlists.

"BC totally dropped the ball," Young said.

College officials recently vowed to work better with Arvin-area educators to advertise classes, and address the glaring transportation issues.

"We are continuing our effort to support all students in the area," Chamberlain said. "We are moving forward."

Still, the sides diverge on several issues regarding where to build a future campus:

* Young argues Arvin is committed to hosting a campus, which is evident by its donations of 25 acres in the center of town. Meanwhile, KCCCD already owns the land outside of Arvin.

* District officials argue the population projections favor the Bear Mountain campus. By 2020, the Arvin campus, within a 10-mile radius, would have 106,500 people, KCCCD reports show. The Bear Mountain campus would have 153,000, not including Frazier Park.

Young argues there is a need in Arvin immediately. About 6,500 people age 18 to 24 live in Arvin and Lamont. That doesn't include students in the Fairfax School District and Mira Monte High School areas. Annually, more than 500 graduate from Arvin High School.

* And it must be one campus or the other, Chancellor Sandra Serrano said, as campuses cannot be within a 20-mile drive of one another, according to state mandates. The centers would be a 10-minute drive apart. Officials must also consider what effect in enrollment either campus would have on BC's main campus, she said.

Ultimately, trustees will have the final say. And there is plenty of time to figure out the state budget issues keeping plans on pause, Trustee Pauline Larwood said.

Among the most vocal trustees has been Stuart Witt, who said people like Young have been asking for changes in southern Kern for years. Witt has asked for immediate ideas, and for transportation issues to be fixed.

Larwood said the district should be keeping a better eye on how Bakersfield College is serving the Arvin area.

As for which location is best, Larwood said "the location has to serve Arvin and other locations as well."

"For now, the biggest issue is are we providing the right classes for the needs of that area," she said.

The Arvin community meeting will be 6 p.m. Thursday in Veteran's Hall, 414 4th St.