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Leaders touting Proposition 4 to aid 'emerging universities' in Texas

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BY GENE TRAINOR
gtrainor@star-telegram.com

University, business and political leaders are traveling the state to generate support for ballot Proposition 4, the state constitutional amendment that could open a floodgate of cash to seven Texas universities seeking to become major research institutions.

Voters will be asked Nov. 3 to shift the \$500 million in the largely unused Permanent Higher Education Fund to what would be called the National Research University Fund.

"Emerging universities" — a state designation that includes the University of North Texas in Denton, the University of Texas at Arlington and the University of Texas at Dallas — would compete for the money. Also in the race would be the University of Houston, the University of Texas at San Antonio, the University of Texas at El Paso and Texas Tech University in Lubbock.

Passage of the ballot proposition could eventually result in thousands of new jobs, perhaps millions of new dollars and all sorts of new technology, supporters say.

"I think it sends a signal to the rest of the country that we're serious about research," said Texas Tech Chancellor Kent Hance, who visited the *Star-Telegram* recently to discuss Proposition 4.

But opposition has emerged. The Young Conservatives of Texas say the money would be better spent rewarding top teachers and providing scholarships to students. Too many college classes are taught by graduate students working as teaching assistants, while full professors spend time on research, said Tony McDonald, the group's vice chairman of legislative affairs.

"We don't need more research," he said. "We need more of a focus on actual learning and education. There needs to be a focus on teaching."

What it means

If the amendment is approved, before the seven universities could dip into the National Research University Fund, they would have to achieve five of seven requirements. Those include a \$400 million endowment, qualified research expenditures of \$45 million a year and a high-achieving freshman class, as defined by the state Higher Education Coordinating Board.

As they achieve goals, money would be awarded on a first-come, first-served basis.

The goal is to help the universities achieve Tier One, or top research, status. Typically, that means spending more than \$100 million a year on research, offering doctoral degrees in at least 50 academic areas, doing well in national rankings, and being a member of the Association of American Universities, the club for the 62 leading research institutions in the United States and Canada.

Currently, Texas, with a population of 24.3 million, has two public Tier One institutions — the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University in College Station — and one that is private, Rice University in Houston. In comparison, New York, population 19.5 million, has seven; California, population 36.8 million, has nine.

The potential benefit from more Tier One schools in Texas could be immense, proponents say.

UT-Austin, the largest of the three at 50,000 students, generates \$2.1 billion in research and out-of-state dollars a year, according to a report from the university. The federal government alone provides more than \$500 million in grants. Other money comes from private grants, investors and out-of-state students eager to attend one of the nation's best public universities. The research dollars help support at least 15,000 jobs, said Don Hale, UT-Austin's vice president for public affairs.

Taxes funding research?

The Young Conservatives point to a December 2008 study published by the Texas Public Policy Foundation, an Austin-based free-market research group, to challenge the premise that university research is a good use of public dollars. The estimated \$9 billion spent by Texas universities over the last 10 years on scientific research has generated a low rate of return of \$8.3 million annually in royalty, patent and other income, said Rick O'Donnell, the report's author. Private industry does a far better job of managing research money, some conservatives say.

McDonald said that rather than concentrate on attracting top researchers, universities should focus on obtaining the best teachers. Too often, universities focus on what's best for the faculty rather than what's best for students, McDonald said.

The Young Conservatives face an uphill fight, though. Texans for Tier One, based in Houston, has been campaigning for months in support of Proposition 4. And the resolution to place Proposition 4 on the ballot passed by unanimous votes this year in both the state Senate and House.

Voter approval is needed to change the fund because it's part of the state constitution, said Sen. Robert Duncan, R-Lubbock, who sponsored the bill that led to Proposition 4. The Permanent Higher Education Fund was created as an endowment for state colleges and universities outside of the University of Texas and Texas A&M systems, but the fund has been dormant.

In response to critics, Duncan said that high-quality research attracts outstanding faculty and students and that Texas loses thousands of students a year to out-of-state institutions because of the lack of Tier One schools. He says his legislation sets up criteria that emerging schools must meet before they would get any money from the fund.

"This whole program is based on production," Duncan said. "That's why I think they're misreading what we're trying to do."

Tier One If voters approve Proposition 4, a fund that now has \$500 million would be available to seven "emerging universities." Before they can tap into the money, they must meet five of seven criteria:

Qualified research spending of \$45 million during both state fiscal years of the preceding biennium.

A \$400 million endowment.

Award 200 doctorates a year.

A high-achieving freshman class.*

A Phi Beta Kappa chapter or membership in the Association of Research Libraries. Phi Beta Kappa offers campus chapters that are open to high-achieving students.

A high-quality faculty.*

Excellent graduate school education.*

* The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board would define the criteria.

Sources: Texans for Tier One, state Sen. Robert Duncan

GENE TRAINOR, 817-390-7419