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Plans Move Forward on SFCC Higher Learning Center

Santa Fe, NM, Nov. 12, 2009 — A Santa Fe Higher Learning Center housing a number of post-secondary programs under one roof has moved one step closer to becoming a reality. The Santa Fe Community College Governing Board has called for a special election early next year to consider a \$35 million general obligation bond issue. If voters approve the bond funding, \$18.9 million would be used for acquisition of land and construction of a Higher Learning Center to serve as an easily accessible in-town campus for SFCC. Contingent on whether operational funds are available, the center would also provide Santa Fe residents with a range of state-supported undergraduate and graduate level programs.

The election will be held Feb. 9, 2010. All voters in the Santa Fe Community College District are eligible to cast ballots. In addition to the \$18.9 million for construction of the Higher Learning Center, the college is asking voters for bond money to make improvements to its infrastructure, fund sustainability projects and renovate existing space for its performing arts program. The general obligation bond for construction and campus improvements would not result in a tax increase.

The college's board will consider adding another question on the Feb. 9 ballot to address operational funds to create the center. At a meeting Dec. 3, board members will deliberate on whether to ask voters to approve a tax of .05 mills for operational costs. The mill levy would have the effect of increasing property taxes on a \$300,000 home in the district by \$5 per year or \$0.42 per month, and would provide the funding necessary to offer a one-stop community college and university center—an opportunity for residents to earn a bachelor's or master's degree from a public university in Santa Fe.

“We hope voters will agree to help bring the opportunity of public higher education to students in Santa Fe,” said SFCC Governing Board Chair Bruce Besser. “A four-year college degree is still out of reach for too many of our local students. Access to affordable, state university programs here in the Capital City will improve the quality of life not only for students but for the community as a whole.”

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As envisioned by SFCC President Sheila Ortego, the Higher Learning Center will be a place where students can complete their first two years of college by attending classes at the community college's campus on Richards Avenue or the new location, then seamlessly transfer to one of a number of programs offered by a university partner. Representatives of the University of New Mexico, Highlands University, Eastern New Mexico, Western New Mexico, New Mexico State, and New Mexico Tech, plus New Mexico Secretary of Higher Education Viola Flores, attended a recent meeting at SFCC to discuss the idea.

"I was pleased with the response of our potential partners to the idea of a Higher Learning Center," Ortego said. "I believe all of New Mexico's public post-secondary institutions are ready to work together for the benefit of students. We agreed this is a collaboration whose time has come, and I look forward to presenting the concept to the voters."

Dr. Ortego said making affordable higher education more accessible to local students has been one of her key goals as president. She emphasized that SFCC would not seek approval to grant bachelor's or master's degrees, but would partner with a wide range of institutions so that students could have several pathways to achieve degrees. She said the Higher Learning Center model is common across the country, pointing to cities like Denver, where the Auraria Higher Education Center brings Denver Community College, Metropolitan State College and the University of Colorado together to serve students in the Rocky Mountain area.

A final location for the Higher Learning Center has not yet been determined, but SFCC is most interested in land on the southern edge of the College of Santa Fe campus. Initial surveys suggest that the Center could serve as many as 500 students in its first year, and reach upwards of 1,000 students by 2016. If all approvals are attained, the facility could open as early as 2011.

About Santa Fe Community College

For more than 25 years, Santa Fe Community College has been the gateway to success for individuals and the community by providing affordable, high quality educational programs that serve the social, cultural, technological and economic needs of a diverse community. The college serves more than 14,500 students per year in its credit, noncredit and adult basic education programs. For further information, visit www.sfcenm.edu or call (505) 428-1000.

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