

In The News

Forum discusses funding public education

HOLYOKE – Politicians, professors and students pushed the need for adequate state funding for K-12 and higher education at a forum at Holyoke Community College on Monday.

“Better investment in education is a win for the economy and a win for workers,” said State Sen. Jo Comerford, D-Northampton, sponsor of the Cherish Act, which would restore state aid cuts to Massachusetts colleges and universities dating back more than a decade.

The bill echoes the state Constitution, which in 1780 called for Massachusetts’ government and residents to “cherish” public education. It would restore state funding of public higher education to no less than its fiscal 2001 per-student level, adjusted for inflation, and freeze tuition and fees for five years.

Five years ago, the Higher Education Finance Commission found that Massachusetts’ public colleges and universities are underfunded by \$574 million a year. For Holyoke Community College, that amounts to about \$10 million a year and students’ costs have risen sharply as state funding has dropped nearly a third.

The college receives \$5,400 in per



Photo courtesy of Trudy Tynan

Holyoke Community College President Christina Royal (left) speaks at a forum on education funding at the college. With her are Stephanie Marcotte, president of the college faculty and staff union, which sponsored the forum, and state Sen. Jo Comerford, D-Northampton, sponsored of the Cherish Act to restore state cutbacks to higher education.

student state support compared to the state average of \$6,100 per student for community colleges, said HCC President Christina Royal. She called for more equitable funding for the college that

she described as “an option for the working class person” that “creates social and economic mobility” and “good citizens and critical thinkers” as well as serving as an economic engine for the region.

HCC Trustees were the first college board to endorse the Cherish Act.

“It’s a game changer,” said state Rep. Aaron Vega, sponsor of the companion Promise Act, which would restore funding of K-12 schools to 2001 levels. He pointed out Lexington, the state’s top performing school district with a wealthy tax base, can afford to spend \$18,000 per pupil or nearly \$6,000 more than Holyoke with its poor population. “Even the best teachers in the world can do only so much if the money isn’t there,” Vega, a graduate of Holyoke Community College, said. A similar bill, which could boost Holyoke’s funding to \$18,000 per pupil, passed the state Senate last year, but failed in the house.

“It’s past time to invest in our students,” Holyoke Mayor Alex Morse told about 70 people gathered in the college library for the forum, sponsored by the Massachusetts Community College Council, the union representing faculty and staff, and moderated by Stephanie Marcotte, president of the HCC union chapter. Also in attendance were Merrie Najimy, president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association, and Rosemarie Freeland, vice president of the community college council.