Funding challenges facing Lynchburg's private colleges discussed at council dinner

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Body

Lynchburg City Council held its annual legislative dinner at the University of Lynchburg on Tuesday, where current members of council were joined by the three candidates who won last week's at-large elections.

The presidents of Lynchburg-area colleges also attended the dinner, where enrollment and funding of private colleges and universities were the main topics of discussion.

The annual dinner marks the end of the legislative agenda process, during which the council lets members of the General Assembly who represent Lynchburg Del. Wendell Walker and Sen. Mark Peake know their top priorities for the 2027 legislative session.

Sally Selden, president of the University of Lynchburg, welcomed guests to the dinner, which was held in the university's Drysdale Student Center.

"We have city leaders in this room. We have legislators. We have the presidents of not one, not two, but five colleges and universities," Selden said in her introductory remarks. "Very few cities our size could actually say that together, our institutions bring thousands of students, thousands of jobs and remarkable energy to this region."

Selden said that "history has shown us that when a city and colleges pull together in the same direction, there is very little that we cannot accomplish together."

"Moments like this call for exactly what this room is designed to do best: to pull up a chair, to listen to each other, and to find common purpose, and to help support our city and their legislative agenda," she said.

The three councilor-elects who attended the dinner were Nat Marshall, Christina Delzingaro and Dave Henderson, all of whom ran as Democrats.

Christopher Peace, president of the Council of Independent Colleges in Virginia, a Richmond-based group that lobbies for nearly 30 colleges and universities in the state, was the keynote speaker. He served in the House of Delegates for 14 years before leaving in 2019. As a delegate, he represented parts of New Kent, Hanover and King William counties.

"Let me also salute our Lynchburg delegation, Sen. Peake and Del. Walker. You have helped us do some things that are equally impactful," Peace told the audience. "Since 2023, Virginia's appropriation for the tuition assistance grant, which we call TAG, has grown from about $91 million to $122 million annually."

Peace said the statewide impact of private colleges, including spending by out-of-state students and visitors, supports about 28,000 jobs, $2 billion in wages and benefits, $4.6 billion in economic output, and an estimated $157 million in tax revenue.

Virginia's investment in the private college sector is about 4% of the state's general fund spending on higher education. Peace said the spending on private colleges is a good investment for the state's taxpayers.

If any of these colleges closed, it would mean more taxpayer spending on public colleges and universities in the state where students would end up attending, he said.

Virginia's preliminary figures show overall undergraduate enrollment in colleges down 1.1% from a year ago. Total enrollment is down 1.4%.

"By 2031, Virginia expects about 5,600 fewer public high school graduates, representing a decline of about 6%. That is the demographic cliff that you've heard so much about," he said.

The "demographic cliff" refers to the period shortly before the financial crash of 2008 when Americans started having fewer babies, a birth rate decline that has yet to recover.

In his comments, Peake said he supports continued funding for the tuition assistance grant program, especially given how it helps colleges and universities in Lynchburg, as well as Central Virginia Community College.

Peake also said he appreciated Gov. Abigail Spanberger's veto of legislation earlier this year that would have extended collective bargaining rights to about 500,000 public employees across the state.

The Republican senator worries that Democrats in Richmond will seek to pass a similar collective bargaining bill in 2027.

Giving city employees the right to collectively bargain "would be devastating to Lynchburg," potentially increasing taxes for city residents, he said.

Walker, a fellow Republican, said he loves to boast about Lynchburg "because we are the smartest community in the commonwealth."

"When people ask why Del. Walker, I say look at the private colleges we have," he said.

But Walker also emphasized the Lynchburg Public Schools division needs to improve how it educates K-12 students. "Our public education has got to do better if we're going to continue to attract people in and then have a pipeline for higher ed," he said.

The General Assembly's 2027 regular session is scheduled to convene on Jan. 13, 2027, and run for an expected 45-day session.

All 40 state Senate seats and 100 House of Delegates seats will be up for election in November 2027.

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