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# Christie mum on college construction funding

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TRENTON — Leaders of New Jersey's colleges and universities had hoped to hear about new plans to fund campus construction and renovation projects from Gov. Chris Christie in his State of the State address Tuesday.

They heard it, but not from Christie. Instead, Senate President Stephen Sweeney picked up the cause, pitching the idea of putting a bond referendum on the ballot in November.

There hasn't been a higher education bond issue in New Jersey since 1988 and Sweeney, a Democrat from Gloucester

County, said it shows on the campuses of the 31 state senior and junior colleges.

Sweeney said, before Christie's speech, that the Legislature must "address the sorry manner in which we provide aid to our institutions of higher learning."

"The idea of issuing a bond to help fund higher education will definitely be a priority in this new session," he said.

Christie was silent on the topic during his 40-minute address, though there's still time for the Republican governor to show public support for the idea, said Paul Shelly, a spokesman for the New Jersey Association of State Colleges and Universities.

"We know he's been thinking about it, and there was a hope he'd talk about it," said Shelly, who added that a bond issue or some other funding mechanism for the schools "will only move forward if the governor is on board with it. There also needs to be critical support not only from Sen. Sweeney but from both sides of the aisle. You're not going to have people support a referendum if there is a political split."

Christie, in an interview earlier this month, said he's been studying whether voters should be asked later this year to approve borrowing money to pay for new classrooms, labs, libraries and other construction.

When Shelly's group commissioned a poll last summer, support for a \$2.6 billion bond issue was tested.

Christie said any borrowing referendum should be for an amount both "meaningful and also affordable."

The state's 31 public higher education institutions enroll more than 430,000 students. The state's independent colleges would likely also be able to access bond funds.

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