Colleges, universities are pleased with budget plan

By The Associated Press

The budget forecast for public higher education may have looked bleak, but Kentucky's state universities and colleges will receive more money than they expected under the General Assembly's proposed budget.

While the first year of the biennium budget approved early Friday by a House and Senate conference committee will force some funding cuts, the second allots at least $65.6 million in new money for the institutions. The figure is 96 percent of what the state Council on Postsecondary Education had recommended.

"It says something very positive about the way General Assembly views education, that legislatures were able to come up with that level of funding given the other challenges facing them this session," said Tom Layzell, president of the council.

The second year of the biennium's budget for postsecondary education includes $20 million to $21 million for the University of Kentucky, which is pushing to become a Top 20 public research university.

"Obviously what we've heard and read, we're very excited about," said UK spokesman Jay Blanton. "But we have not seen the final numbers and we won't until the General Assembly approves the budget."

University of Louisville President Jim Ramsey said the amount budgeted for his university was "far more than anyone expected."

"They did everything they could in the second year to recognize the importance of higher education," Ramsey said.

Western Kentucky University President Gary Ransdell said happy with the budget overall, but has concerns about the first year.

The budget calls for base funding at Western Kentucky to increase by $1.7 million next year, and $5.8 million the year after, he said.

"It will be hard to keep progress going in the first year," Ransdell said, adding that the 2006-2007 budget leaves "very little margin for any of our campuses to address strategic priorities."

House Speaker Jody Richards, D-Bowling Green, said providing education is "the primary function of state government."

"We better funded our schools and better funded Western," he said.