

New ICC Commons Space Proposal



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Founded in 1964, Isothermal Community College is a two-year public institution serving Rutherford and Polk Counties in western North Carolina. The college recently celebrated its 60-year anniversary as a workforce driver for the service area and surrounding region. This celebration of six decades of tremendous impact has also led to increased reflection and focus on the physical campus infrastructure that supports students and the greater community.

Construction of the college's earliest facilities was completed in 1968. These facilities included the Administration building – largely considered to be the “front door” of the campus – as well as the information technology (IT) building. The library, also built in 1968, is currently undergoing a comprehensive interior renovation scheduled for completion in the spring of 2026. Several other campus facilities followed throughout the 1970s and 80s, all of which remain in operation today despite being in dire need of extensive repairs and renovations.

Education infrastructure built in the 1960-70s era was generally designed for an approximately 50-year lifespan. Nearly half of the college's current facilities have exceeded this lifespan. In the fall of 2024, the college worked with the North Carolina State Construction Office to complete a Facilities Comprehensive Audit Program (FCAP). The state's completion of a multi-day inspection of all systems across campus facilities resulted in urgent repair and/or renovation findings totaling nearly \$50 million. As the college's annual capital improvement budget is less than 3% of this total cost, it is time for the institution to implement a new strategy for addressing its vast infrastructure issues.

Four campus facilities constructed from 1968 to 1988 – Administration, Communications, Health & Public Services, and IT – comprise just under 63,000 square feet of the total campus footprint. Collectively, the 2024 FCAP report found that these facilities will require ~\$12.5 million in repairs and renovations just to meet minimum state and local building code as well as ADA compliance standards. Additionally, these facilities contain significant environmental hazards such as asbestos and lead that are costly to remediate. This total cost would include no investment in modernization of building operations,

energy efficiencies, aesthetics, or grounds beautification. Further, simply addressing these repair and renovation needs would not adequately future-proof the facilities, as they were not built to accommodate the enrollment growth nor evolving programming that enable the college to fully serve the community. As a recent example, construction of the new ~53,000 square foot Health & Sciences Center currently scheduled for completion in late 2026 became necessary to the continued expansion of nursing and other health sciences programming vital to workforce development and community well-being. This facility will effectively replace the old Health & Public Services building, which will now house a limited number of continuing education and curriculum programs.

As a solution to the above challenges, the college is proposing construction of a new campus career commons space built to meet the needs of the 21st century student and beyond. This facility will serve as a one-stop hub for students and community members to access all vital services needed on their journey to connect to the workforce and other economic enrichment opportunities. Such services will include admissions, financial aid, advising, business office, human resources, and administration. The WNCW radio station will also operate from this state-of-the-art facility as it seeks to further broaden its international audience. Additionally, key community partners such as the Foothills Regional Commission, employment and economic development partners, and industry groups will have space within the facility to directly connect with current and prospective students.

The target square footage for this facility will be ~72,000 to accommodate all functional areas while optimizing space utilization and energy efficiency. Based on current new construction costs of \$650/square foot, the college estimates a budget of ~\$47 million for this facility. An additional \$1 million in funding would be necessary to demolish the 1960-70s facilities identified above and provide landscaping/hardscaping for the new facility for a total project budget of ~\$48 million. This investment would allow the college to realize significant long-term county capital cost savings from foregoing repairs and renovations to existing facilities, as well as savings in annual utilities costs from increased energy efficiency. These savings combined with potential revenue increases based on enrollment growth will result in an unprecedented return on investment for the college and Rutherford County.

Rutherford County has tremendous potential to emerge as a leading economic and workforce hub in western North Carolina. However, this will require bridging the current gap that exists between K-12 and higher education as up to 50% of Rutherford County Schools graduates do not currently pursue a postsecondary credential. Investment in a state-of-the-art facility that connects students in real time with the college, community partners, and industry leaders necessary to support their success will not only bridge this gap but also help secure a prosperous future for the county and surrounding region.