

By Sarah Nagem (snagem@salisburypost.com)

Rowan-Cabarrus Community College leaders on Monday agreed to pay the developers of the N.C. Research Campus about \$44 million over 20 years so the school can operate there.

The college's board of trustees voted to enter into a lease with Castle & Cooke, the company building the science campus in Kannapolis.

RCCC will pay Castle & Cooke about \$2.2 million a year for 20 years, said Robert Keeney, vice president of business and technical services for the school.

RCCC will use money set aside by state lawmakers to pay its rent. The General Assembly is appropriating \$3.3 million a year to the school to pay the lease and other expenses such as utilities and insurance, Keeney said.

Community colleges normally operate with state funding that is doled out based on student enrollment.

"The research campus is a little different," Keeney said.

The school cannot use its regular state money to pay its bills in Kannapolis. Instead, RCCC will have to depend on the special state appropriation coming in every year.

That's a gamble some board members said worried them.

"I can understand why anyone would be concerned about funding from the state of North Carolina, believe me," said Sen. Fletcher Hartsell, who represents Cabarrus and Iredell counties. Hartsell has played a key role in development of the research campus.

But Hartsell told board members that lawmakers haven't argued about the state appropriations to RCCC.

"It simply was not an issue," he said.

The 60,000-square-foot building will house biotechnology and agricultural biotechnology classes, Keeney said. The building might also be used for clinical research.

Keeney recommended that the board enter into the lease. The risk of not signing on, he said, is missing out on space to train students for science jobs.

But Keeney said there are risks for entering into the contract, too.

"If the jobs don't materialize, the demand won't materialize," he said. "And we'll end up with a very expensive building not doing much."

The rent payments will stay the same throughout the years. But other costs, such as utilities and labor, will likely increase.

At some point, Cabarrus and Rowan counties might need to pitch in money to help RCCC deal with inflation, Keeney said.

"We'll have to find some additional money," he said.

The community college is the "linchpin" of the research campus, Lynne Scott Safrit, president of Castle & Cooke North Carolina, said during the meeting.

"We're just excited about the role you will play in this," Safrit said.

Ray Paradowski, president of the board of trustees, said he's excited the research campus will "fill in that tremendous void of the textile industry moving out."