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Tuition plan would offer LI families relief

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Long Island college administrators and a local economist expressed their support for a state aid initiative that would provide tuition relief for middle-income families during a public hearing yesterday at Dowling College.

State Sen. Kenneth LaValle (R-Port Jefferson) plans to introduce legislation in which families earning less than \$150,000 would pay no more than 10 percent of their income for tuition and fees at public or private New York colleges, if the latter agree to limit annual tuition increases.

LaValle said Long Islanders endure many financial burdens, including high housing costs and taxes, and college shouldn't be another, a notion echoed by several speakers.

"This constituency has long needed relief from the escalating costs of a college education," said W. Hubert Keen, president of Farmingdale State College.

"Today's college graduates leave school with more debt than ever before," said Pearl Kamer, chief economist of the Long Island Association.

"The burden of college debt" keeps some young people from lower-paying public service jobs, like social work, she said, and contributes to "brain drain"; Long Island has lost about one-fifth of its young people since 2000, Kamer said.

LaValle's plan would require those who access the program to commit to living in New York State for five years after college, said LaValle, chairman of the Higher Education Committee.

Kamer said that could help Long Islanders earn degrees and stay local "without assuming crippling debt."

"This is a wonderful way to say, 'Stay in New York, it's a better deal,'" said David Steinberg, president of Long Island University.

However, members of the Albany-based Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy

yesterday voiced concern. "To put a ... proposal on the table that doesn't meet the needs of folks at lower income levels strikes us as an odd use of tax dollars," Karen Schimke, the center's president, said in an interview.

Those who earn the state's median net taxable household income of \$43,000 who pay 10 percent toward tuition would owe \$4,300 a year, a savings of just \$50 on current tuition rates at SUNY four-year colleges, said Tom Hilliard, a senior policy associate.

"It wouldn't help that person at the median income very much if they're going to public school," he said.

Another public hearing will be held in Albany on Jan. 14. LaValle said he hopes to file the legislation by the month's end.

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