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Controller's office seeks help as it plays catchup

BY DAVID SINGLETON (STAFF WRITER)

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Lackawanna County Controller Gary DiBileo sees it as an opportunity to his office catch up on lagging audits while giving area college students some real-world experience.

Mr. DiBileo is working on the details of a program to offer college student internships to assist with the preparation of audits of county departments the controller's office is required to perform. The interns would not be paid but would earn college credits.

The program would help address an audit backlog that has been a chronic problem for the controller's office for at least a decade.

Mr. DiBileo, who told the commissioners at their Jan. 25 meeting that he

looking into the proposal, said last week he knew the controller's office was behind on audits but it was only after his swearing-in in late December that he realized how far.

"The best way to describe that is how many weeks it would take one full-time auditor in our office to work in all the departments to get those departments up to complete accountability," he said. "So one person would take almost three years, two would take about a year and a half, and three could probably do it in less than a year.

"We have three full-time auditors, so we really are at about half-staff as far as what we probably need. I'm not complaining. I'm simply informing the public of where the controller's office currently stands."

Mr. DiBileo said the student interns, who would come from the ranks of accounting and business majors, would be engaged mainly in gathering information for the auditors in his office.

"My office will supervise and still be responsible for that the work," he said. "We would be fully responsible for the final audits."

He said he would like to get the program up and running as soon as the parameters can be worked out with participating schools.

Mr. DiBileo's office manager, Mary Jo Sheridan, said she has had conversations so far with the University of Scranton and Penn State Worthington Scranton, as well as Misericordia University.

"All of the folks I have spoken to, and again it's very preliminary, have expressed enthusiasm," she said.

How the internships are structured probably would vary based on the requirements of the institutions and the students, she said. Some may be part time during the school year; others could be full time during the summer.

"But there are many students out there interested, for one, in staying local and being able to get a local internship, and many who are interested in internal auditing specifically down the road instead of becoming public accountants," Ms. Sheridan said. "Then there are students who are really interested in government, getting involved in government."

David Burnis, business internship and Linde Family Business Mentoring coordinator at Penn State Worthington Scranton said the school is looking forward to its students taking part.

"It definitely will give them some good practical experience in terms of the real world," Mr. Burnis said. "That is the goal of the internship program we have - that they get a sense of what the work setting is going to be as opposed to just reading about it in a textbook."

The University of Scranton hopes to participate and is awaiting more information from Mr. DiBileo's office, spokesman Zygmunt said.

"The university is very interested in finding internship opportunities for students that give them real-world experience in their majors," he said.

Mr. DiBileo said his office is currently auditing several departments, including the district attorney's office, the treasurer's office, the prison, the magisterial district courts and the Tax Claim Bureau. But it remains behind on a host of others that include the recorder of deeds, clerk of judicial records and sheriff's department.

Even though the formal audits may not be complete, his office does monitor most departments within the county on a monthly basis, he said.

"We are trying to prioritize our focus here to get a better handle on where we should be concentrating," Mr. DiBileo said.

He acknowledged clearing up the backlog will take more time, but said he hopes to have a "real hold on the situation" by the end of 2012.

"I don't expect to be fully caught up on all audits at that point," Mr. DiBileo said, "but I would love to be close."

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