



The Huntsville Times

PACT meet airs frustrations

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By Keith Clines

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Group organizes to exert pressure for fund solution

Anger, confusion, frustration and tenacity all percolated through the Huntsville-Madison County Library auditorium Saturday afternoon during the initial meeting of the Madison County PACT group.

After having paid into the Prepaid Affordable College Tuition program, the 100 or so people were angry that the state might not fulfill its promise to pay for their children's and grandchildren's college tuition.

Some were frustrated that the University of Alabama and Auburn University won't freeze tuition for PACT participants.

They were confused about how to save the program, but determined to pressure elected officials into finding a solution.

"I know most of you came to vent your frustrations about the program," said Donna Peacher, who ran the meeting.

Fred and Shirley McCreless attended the meeting because they have bought the plan three times for their grandsons here to attend college. One has finished college, another is attending the University of Alabama and the third will be a freshman at Grissom High School next month.

"We're so concerned that there doesn't seem to be any concern in Montgomery," Shirley McCreless said before the meeting. "They keep bouncing it around like a rubber ball."

The McCrelesses also bought similar plans offered in Colorado for two grandsons there. The Colorado plan is run by a foundation and is more expensive than the Alabama plan, Fred McCreless said.

He said the Colorado plan, unlike the Alabama plan, makes it clear up front that the program is based on investments.

"To us, that was not an investment," Fred McCreless said, referring to documents provided to the couple when they bought into the Alabama plan. "That was a promissory note made to us."

Fred McCreless said the couple is afraid they will have to dig into their pocket for \$40,000 to put the incoming ninth-grade Grissom grandson through college in a few years if the PACT program goes bust.

"If this fails," he said, "there's no way we're going to say, 'Sorry, kid. Your cousins got theirs, but you're not going to get yours.' "

The PACT Trust Fund's value was chopped from \$793 million to \$463 million over about 15 months because of the faltering economy.

The state is waiting on a study by the Retirement Systems of Alabama that could recommend ways to save the program. About 48,000 people have bought prepaid tuition plans.

Peacher is among many residents who are looking to the Legislature to resolve the issue.

"They're going to have to come up with a funding solution," she said.

Saturday's organizational meeting was intended to increase membership, elect leaders and create "a voting bloc to wield some power with the Legislature," Peacher said.

Other discussions at the meeting involved keeping up letter-writing campaigns to the media and elected officials, creating a Web site and creating e-mail distribution lists.

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