Less than six months after the worst mass shooting in state history, Oregon lawmakers faced a $17.6 million decision.

During the short February session, lawmakers approved $6 million for Umpqua Community College to renovate Snyder Hall, where nine students were shot and killed, and improve the school’s safety and security measures following the Oct. 1 massacre.

But a separate $17.6 million request to replace doors, add security cameras and beef up aging buildings and communications systems at the state’s other 16 community colleges went nowhere.

Instead lawmakers told community colleges to try again in 2017.
Perhaps no community college felt the sting of the funding denial more than Clackamas Community College, which has a branch campus across the street from the site of a 2012 mass shooting at a suburban mall.

"Waiting until next year doesn’t do us any good," said Brent Finkbeiner, the school’s student government president and the board chair of the Oregon Community College Student Association.

Clackamas had requested more than $1.6 million from the state for a variety of projects, such as installing electronic locks on 90 entrances and 124 doors across various buildings. Its main Oregon City campus alone covers some 165 acres and includes more than a dozen buildings. About 25,000 students are enrolled at the school at any given time, including about 7,000 full time.

Finkbeiner, a 29-year-old U.S. Army veteran from Pennsylvania, said Oregon isn’t sending a good message to its community college students and faculty by failing to act. "We have to show that we’re vigilant," he said. "We have to show that we’re going to be constantly improving safety year after year."

Clackamas and other schools, he said, are all roughly 50 years old and face the same issues: few security systems, dark parking lots and walkways and too many places for an armed individual to hide.

Dave Hunt, a former Speaker of the Oregon House and a CCC board member, lobbied the Legislature earlier this year, citing the danger of an attack on any of Oregon's community college campuses.

"Now is the time to take action on targeted safety and security capital investments on every campus to prevent future incidents and improve chances of survival when incidents do occur," he wrote in Feb. 12 letter to a state committee.

Hunt, who served a decade in the Legislature, said he was impressed by the "strong uniform support" behind the measure – which would've affected communities from Medford to Pendleton to Portland.

But the overtures fell on deaf ears. "It’s a missed opportunity to respond to an urgent situation," Hunt said in an interview Tuesday.

Clackamas is the rare community college in Oregon with armed security guards on campus, and that, too, could be changing.

The school has had a long-standing arrangement with the Clackamas County Sheriff's Office to commission its on-campus security members as law enforcement officers.

The college’s four full-time campus security offices and part-time security staff are allowed to carry guns and badges and have the authority of police officers thanks to the more than 20-year-old agreement.

But Rhodes said the sheriff’s office is terminating that deal effective June 30. Rhodes said the campus safety officers participate in some firearms training and defensive maneuvering offerings with deputies, but they are not credentialed with the state’s Department of Public Safety Standards and Training and the arrangement does little for the sheriff’s office. "It’s not fair to them to make them special deputies," Rhodes said of the campus officers, "because with that comes a great deal of responsibilities."

Finkbeiner said students aren’t pleased with the changes. "The police officers on campus are part of what make us safe," he said. But he’s optimistic the school will find a solution.

Clackamas also has a vacancy for its campus public safety director’s position and has seen some turnover in the past few years. "It leaves a gap in campus security," Finkbeiner said, adding he has faith the administration will address the issue.

Jim Huckestein, CCC’s vice president of college services, said the college is still determining the future of on-campus security officers. The school could pay for armed security, or have officers remain as unarmed safety crews. It could also pay the sheriff’s office an estimated $160,000 to have a full time deputy assigned to the school. Huckestein said that is "considerably higher" than the current budget.

"The community is used to having armed officers," Huckestein said, so the school is considering that option.
Huckestein said Clackamas will move forward with $800,000 in security improvements next year, using money from a 2014 bond measure. But the school has "well over $3 million" worth of improvements it would like to do.

Not everyone is disappointed in the state's choice to punt the safety issue to 2017. Andrea Henderson, the executive director of the Oregon Community College Association, said the conversation about campus security "is far from over."

Oregon's community colleges sent delegations to a one-day training with a national consultant after the shooting, where they discussed best practices and looked at the next steps for how to improve emergency notification systems and other campus measures.

Henderson said she expects a "more robust" discussion in 2017. "It's still not that far away from October 1," she said of the Roseburg massacre, "and we're still learning from that incident."

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