

Bill to fund worker retraining programs springs back to life

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Community colleges scrambling to provide worker retraining would get some relief under a bill that was first tabled, then resurrected by the Senate this week.

Senate Bill 5809 would provide \$18 million for work force retraining without tapping the state's Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund. An earlier version of the bill that would have diverted \$56 million from the fund to retrain unemployed workers for high-demand jobs was tabled Monday after Republicans argued that diverting the money for a different purpose would in effect create a new tax. That would have required a two-thirds vote of each legislative chamber.

The revised bill passed the Senate 48-1 and now moves to the House.

"I thank the sponsor for listening to our concerns about diverting funds from the UI trust fund and finding an appropriate

funding source for worker training," said Sen. Janea Holmquist, R-Moses Lake, who had objected to the diversion.

Money to pay for the program in the year beginning July 1 will come from penalty and interest fees deposited in the Employment Security Department contingency account.

Unemployed workers eligible to receive benefits will be those who are eligible for unemployment benefits or who have exhausted their benefits, and who are training in "high-demand" occupations.

The bill was amended to include forest products and aerospace jobs as "high-demand" occupations. The original bill applied only to occupations in the health care and energy efficiency fields.

Clark College saw a 31 percent increase in enrollment last year by workers training for new jobs and is quickly exhausting its funding for worker retraining in the current academic year.