

Interview with F. Wesley Bowers
Interviewer: Unidentified
1972

Q: What was the sentiment among the legislators in the 1965 General Assembly about starting a public higher education institution here?

A: Well, all of the legislators were 100% behind the effort to get a state university instituted in Evansville. I might give you some background. In 1963 Representative Toon and Representative Abshier from Evansville introduced a resolution asking Indiana University and Purdue to immediately start to plan a four-year state university or an extension in Evansville. That bill died in committee. In 1965, when the Democrats took control of the legislature, Representative Toon and Representative Abshier again introduced this bill, memorializing IU and Purdue to take steps to start building a four-year university in Evansville. Prior to the 1965 session I had gone to Evansville College's President, Melvin Hyde and asked him if he would be willing to support a program of subsidization of Evansville College. I felt that the more sensible approach to the problem was to put state funds into Evansville College. Evansville was the only large size community in the state which did not have a state extension of Purdue or IU within 50 miles. I felt we were being short-changed. Dr. Hyde however, disagreed, and felt Evansville College needed no support and no aid. Consequently, I supported the effort of Representative Toon and Representative Abshier in the legislature.

Q: What problems did the legislators encounter in the 1965 General Assembly

A: Well, fortunately, since we were Democrats and the legislature was Democratic, we didn't have a great deal of difficulty with our fellow legislators, although there was resistance. IU and Purdue University vigorously resisted the effort. In addition, Evansville College friends and Dr. Hyde vigorously resisted the effort. They were very vigorous in their opposition to this bill. However, the ordinary citizen in Evansville who was aware of the high cost of education, and labor unions, immediately gave full support and we found in our visits back home that hundreds of people would come out to the legislative meetings and this was the most publicly backed effort. Originally the Chamber of Commerce and the Evansville Future were lukewarm to the proposal. I think this was because of Dr. Hyde's opposition. Dr. Hyde had been very important in the development of Evansville 's Future and a very fine promoter of Evansville and the efforts to rehabilitate Evansville. Very few people were willing to do anything that might harm Evansville College. So, there was a real fear and genuine concern that any state college in Evansville would harm the growth and development of Evansville College. However, in view of the widespread public support , and the widespread newspaper support, finally Evansville's Future and the Chamber of Commerce came out and supported this effort.

Q: Was there ever any urging in the beginning for a two-year instead of a fouryear college?

A: Well the resolution as originally introduced, as I recall it, called for a four-year institution. But the hope was that there would just be an extension a beginning.

Q: And then there wasn't any plan for a separate university at that time

A: I think there might have been this hope in the back of our minds, but the primary concern was just to get something started. Because it was costing Evansville students and area people too much to go to college.

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Q: (Illegible)

A: That's right.

Q: (Illegible)

A: Well I might say this, that I was a senate sponsor of the resolution in 1965, and when it came up in the senate Jack Mankin, who was a majority leader from Terre Haute, came to me and said "Why don't you put ISU in there?" This was the first time I had ever heard of the possibility of ISU coming to Evansville. I was reluctant to do this because I was afraid the bill might then get into a squabble on the floor and we might not be able to pass it, so I refused to do this. Subsequent to our passage of that bill, then representatives of ISU came to Evansville and met with Mayor McDonald. When we learned that they were going to do this, we as legislators here were happy, because IU and Purdue were not going to do anything at all. They had a contract, an agreement, an understanding, with the other colleges that there would be no extension put into Evansville. And I told the Vice-president of IU and the Vice-president of Purdue that they had no right to make such an agreement. This was an agreement with the Indiana Conference of Colleges. I'm an IU graduate myself, but I resented IU and Purdue doing this and supported the ISUE effort. We got together, I prepared a letter for all the legislators to sign which said we as legislators would support the effort of ISUE, of ISU, to come in. I think without that support of the legislators, they would have been very reluctant to do that. We pledged to support, we pledged that we work for financial backing, and we would do whatever was necessary to legislatively assure the ability of ISU to come here.