Chico State president sees hope in governor’s speech

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The governor’s talk of boosting funding for higher education Wednesday was encouraging on several levels, Chico State University President Paul Zingg said in a phone interview.

In his State of the State speech, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said California’s spending more money on prisons than it does on universities was “unhealthy” and “no way to proceed into the future.”

The governor vowed to reverse this funding pattern.

Schwarzenegger’s office sent out a news release detailing his proposal regarding prisons and universities.

It said that today California spends more than 10 percent of its funds on prisons and 7 percent on higher education.

“Under the governor’s initiative, no less than 10 percent of taxpayer money would be allocated to fund public institutions of higher education; and no more than 7 percent of Californians’ money would be allocated to support of the state prison system,” it said.

“It’s encouraging to hear this,” Zingg commented, noting it was a message “a lot of us have been waiting a long time to hear.”

Such a change in funding “would make a huge difference” in itself, Zingg said. “It would stabilize where we are now and prevent further erosion of quality.”

Because of budget cuts, campuses of the State University, community colleges and University of California have had to limit enrollment, raise fees, terminate contracts for some part-time teachers, and in some cases cancel programs.

A change like the governor proposed would signal that higher education had hit bottom in the budget crisis and would start to rebound, Zingg said. That would boost morale throughout the university and stop what he called “the brain drain” — the departure of talented faculty who have become disheartened about the future.
It would be a good sign for the state’s economy, too, he said, because increasingly high percentages of jobs require a college education.

Finally, it would send a message of hope for the entire state, Zingg said.

The question has to be asked, he said, “will we have a future with opportunity, or are we just going to mark time, fearful of our lives?”

The governor’s speech contained “elements of hope,” he said, suggesting that Californians will not “just cower in fear because of crime in the streets.”

Still, Zingg said, there’s a big difference between talking about more funding for universities and actually having that funding secured in an approved state budget.

He said he’ll be interested to see what Schwarzenegger proposes on Friday when he presents his new state budget.

In his speech Wednesday, the governor mentioned the budget and promised, “I will protect education.”

He seemed to be referring to K-12 education with that remark, but he added, “we can no longer afford to cut higher education either.”