

Idaho Falls Post Register, Sunday, June 22, 2008 – Opinion by Marty Trilhaase

White's good counsel

Outgoing University of Idaho President Tim White delivered a massive dose of reality to the State Board of Education last week in Idaho Falls. Next month, White will become chancellor of the University of California, Riverside -- which plans to launch a medical school. It will cost nearly \$1 billion to begin and \$87 million a year to operate (in today's dollars) in an area with four times Idaho's population.

Idaho may not need \$1 billion to realize Idaho State University's dreams of a medical school. But even if the cost is \$500 million, where will it come from? Perhaps a wealthy benefactor, although Idaho has relatively few of those. The state could divert roughly 16 percent of its annual higher education appropriation. Or raise taxes. But that means getting in line behind a \$240 million package for highways, \$1 billion for new prisons and a commitment to cut the sales taxes Idahoans pay on groceries by about \$122 million.

White understands fiscal realities of medical education. He chaired the Department of Movement Science at the University of Michigan and the Department of Human Biodynamics at UC-Berkeley.

And nobody better understands the limits of Idaho's good will and support for higher education. White cleaned up the University Place mess he inherited from former UI President Bob Hoover. That failed satellite campus project plunged the UI Foundation \$26 million in debt and left the university awash in lawsuits, liquidations and disappointed donors.

Listening to White, you realize Idaho is fixated on what goes into the medical education pipeline, not what comes out of it. If Idaho needs more doctors, double the number of University of Washington medical school seats through the Washington-Wyoming-Alaska-Montana-Idaho cooperative. Bring Idaho WWAMI students to Boise-based hospitals. Expand the family medicine residency programs now operating at Boise and Pocatello. Those are comparatively cheap to operate and offer health care to the poor. Equally important, residents who work in Idaho stay in Idaho.

If it's a matter of attracting bio-medical research dollars to Idaho, that gap is about to be filled. The Veterans Administration has approved \$8 million for a bio-medical research institute at its Boise-based hospital. Idaho's three universities will collaborate on the program, if the Legislature approves funding. The center could open as early as December 2009.

White is one of the few Idaho university presidents ever to leave this state for a more prestigious post. For him, the path of least resistance would have been to exit Idaho silently. Saying anything now -- no matter how credible and well-informed -- exposes him to allegations of sour grapes and/or parochialism.

So he gains little personally from offering this advice. Idaho's higher education and political leadership would be wise to follow it.