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## Report confirms need for more MDs

BOISE — A Florida-based consulting firm largely reasserted Idaho's need for more doctors after it released a long-awaited report assessing the feasibility of a medical school in the Gem State to an interim Legislative committee Tuesday.

Members from the State Board of Education and representatives from Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter's health care task force were present in Boise as the consulting firm reviewed the data collected, how it went about collecting the data and its interpretation of the information.

The Idaho Legislature commissioned the report two years ago. Supporters believe the proposal for the Gem State's first medical school would help drive down general health care costs by investing more dollars into the state's hospitals.

Part of the problem behind unaffordable health care in Idaho, supporters said, is that Idaho has a relatively low number of in-state doctors.

Based on what the lawmakers referred to as just an "informational" meeting, the committee compiled a list of tasks to be completed before it reconvenes on Sept. 15.

Those tasks will include bringing in both large and small hospital representatives to discuss the challenges of recruiting doctors in Idaho, having Idaho State University President Arthur Vailas explain what a model for a medical school would look like, reviewing the steps and accreditation process needed for establishing a medical school and determining more specific cost estimates for an institution.

A large part of Vailas' task will be to gather data from all of the state colleges. Lawmakers said a medical school would be based at one institution, but will enroll students from all of the state colleges.

A current debate among college officials in Idaho is where a state medical school would be located. Vailas and Sen. Diane Bilyeu, D-Pocatello, have supported basing the school at ISU.

"But I think that president Vailas' model would probably be the most comprehensive model," said Idaho Sen. Bob Geddes, R-Soda Springs.

However, with the Gem State ranked among the worst states in number of available doctors, the demand for a medical school is increasing.

Steve Coker, a Pocatello orthopedic surgeon and a trustee on the Idaho Medical Association Board of Trustees, wrote in an e-mail Tuesday that the Gem State ranked 49th in the number of doctors per capita.

Geddes co-chaired the joint committee that spent most of Tuesday reviewing the firm's report. His committee also listened to an analyst who released information about other states that are looking to expand their existing medical schools or add new institutions.

Geddes, who cited the study's data and the analyst's report, said because so few Gem State doctors are available, many Idahoans are forced to go out of state to receive medical treatment.

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“There’s a crisis in every situation. But if you look at where Eastern Idaho goes for medical services, a huge number of our people go to Utah for services,” he said. “Boise is self-sufficient, and Northern Idaho goes to Spokane (Wash.). We need to determine if we can operate that way or expand more medical facilities. We’re also looking at what will increase medical opportunities for citizens.”

When more definite plans get mapped out, the committee will decide if it wants to propose the possibility of a medical school to the state Legislature next year.

“I hope it comes out in the committee,” Bilyeu said. “Some of the side additions that can happen for Idaho, such as the financial returns, can happen if you have a medical school. A medical school can bring in so many more things.”