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ISU chief to talk to panel on med school

Idaho State University President Arthur Vailas will speak Monday to an interim joint legislative committee that was formed with the goal of eventually proposing legislation to increase medical education in Idaho.

Vailas will also reveal inventory findings about the available resources the state's universities have for establishing a medical program in Idaho.

"He wants to talk about a distributive model," said Kent Tingey, ISU's Vice President for Advancement. "But he also wants to talk about the inventories: What is it that Idaho has in terms of resources, abilities, equipment and human resources that could be used toward an Idaho-based medical education program."

The interim committee first met last month where they reviewed the MGT report, a study that largely reasserted the need for more doctors in Idaho. The Gem State ranks 49th in doctors per capita.

Before the committee adjourned, it charged Vailas with the task of presenting a distributive model, as well as gathering data from the state's universities to determine which resources Idaho's higher institutions currently have for operating a medical program.

Proponents of a medical program in Idaho said the model could have a variety of designs, with a distributive model being one. Vailas previously touted a school where medical students would attend at least the first two years at a fixed campus.

Other models supported by both local doctors and lawmakers include expanding the Wyoming, Washington, Alaska, Montana and Idaho medical program, create a system that would include professionals and faculty teaching at existing facilities or erect an actual campus.

WWAMI is a regional program that reserves a limited number of seats for medical students from the five states at the University of Washington School of Medicine in Seattle.

However, some local lawmakers remain unsure of how far the interim committee will go in proposing a medical program before Idaho's 2009 Legislative session. This is also the first year that university heads have actively worked with lawmakers to propose a medical school to the Legislature, and some supporters for a more efficient program believe that it may take a few more meetings before a solid proposal is finalized.

Tingey summed up the upcoming meeting Monday with few words. "There's a lot to cover," he said.

Ben Call, a local cardiologist and member of the Idaho Medical Association, said lawmakers and university presidents are going in the right direction by envisioning a medical program or school, but contends other long term issues also need to be addressed.

"The question we need to ask is what is going to be the best solution for the state in 25 years. We need to answer that question first and how we can best arrive to that," Call said. "I firmly believe that the answer to this question is going to involve answers that none of us ever considered."

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He said the committee may need to meet for a few more times before the 2009 Legislative session, and that it needs to draw up a list of values. He said those values need to answer the questions of what benefits a medical school should provide, exactly where it should be centered and whether it should involve the state's three major universities.

Sen. Diane Bilyeu, D-Pocatello, is part of the committee and agreed there should be a set of values that the body needs to establish before proceeding with ambitious proposals.

“What I'm hoping for is that the committee will be able to set out what goals we need to accomplish,” Bilyeu said. “You can't do everything in three or four meetings before the Legislature starts. It's got to be thoughtful. And costs need to be measured, too. The Legislature won't do anything without (knowing the) costs.”