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Vailas touts med school

ISU president still holds out hope that state will get school

POCATELLO — Idaho State University President Arthur Vailas said Tuesday that he still holds out hope the Gem State will one day have a medical school, even calling it vital to health care services throughout the state. But he also said that until that day comes, he's content with continuing to build ISU's health care programs that he believes will one day be an important part of any medical school in Idaho.

"ISU has a chance to change the entire landscape of our state," Vailas said. "We have grown in an integrated fashion and built on health care education in all facets. We continue to invest in medical education."

He said ISU's health care related degree and certification programs now comprise about 38 percent of the university's total.

Vailas made the comments during a luncheon with local media in the Rotunda of the L.E. and Thelma E. Stephens Performing Arts Center on Tuesday. It's a regular event the university president hosts during which he shares some of ISU's recent accomplishments and future visions. He also fielded several questions during the closing minutes of the luncheon and his comments about health care stemmed from one such question. Vailas was asked about the push early in his tenure, which began during the summer of 2006, for a medical school in Idaho and his position that ISU was prime to take a lead role in its development.

He said the idea, although on a back-burner at this time, is still something he supports. "I learned that states that do not make an investment in medical education have difficulty in providing both the quantity and quality of service to their citizens," Vailas said. "It's kind analogous of what equity do you build by renting versus building, over time, your own infrastructure.

"That doesn't mean you don't partner or cooperate, but over time you have to have some kind of infrastructure that is sustainable and continues to grow. I still believe that and the data shows that."

He said the country is also moving toward an ideology that promotes preventative medicine rather than crisis management for economic reasons.

"We have to go into a preventative medicine compliance mode and have both legal reforms and health insurance reforms that reward that," Vailas said. "Idaho State University is in the best position out of any university to play a major role in that."

Among the other subjects Vailas was asked about was the disposition of the former Ballard Medical Building, which ISU purchased for \$3.8 million with plans to create a research facility.

He said the university took some risk in purchasing the facility during difficult economic times, but it's one he believes could eventually pay significant dividends. Vailas said that his confidence is based on some of

the prospective projects that may eventually be housed in the building, but said he could not elaborate on those at this time.

What he did say, however, is that preparing the 200,000-square-foot building for that use will likely cost several million dollars.

“It might be a few million over time,” he said. “We’re not doing it all at once. We’re doing it in modules.”

Vailas also fielded several questions regarding the current climate at ISU. With an interim Faculty Senate in place working on a new constitution for the entity’s future operation that is nearly in place, Vailas said he has no regrets about how heated the debate has gotten at times.

He said healthy debate is important for a university, but he also declined to comment more specifically on the tone of the debate. “I think debate is debate,” he said.