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OU plans health care, research hub

Officials say facility and planned medical school could generate millions of dollars, thousands of jobs.

Marisa Schultz / The Detroit News

ROCHESTER HILLS -- Oakland University plans to transform the northwestern corner of its campus into a health care and research hub with the development of a research park that could pump millions of much-needed federal and private research dollars into Michigan's economy.

While the three main structures that will make up the still-unnamed research park will likely not be complete until 2014, backers say the plan will do much to attract investment to Oakland County, which recently launched "Oakland Medical," an initiative aimed at marketing the county as a health care destination.

The medical park "fits in very nicely with our plans to brand the region as a center of excellence in health care," said Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson, who added that he is convinced a medical research park would gain national prominence very quickly and catapult the reputation of the county and university.

The effort comes a year after Oakland University revealed plans for the state's first medical school in four decades. While a full economic impact study has yet to be conducted, school president Gary Russi estimates the medical school alone will spark \$1 billion in economic activity and 11,000 new jobs, with the park to add "many more" jobs on top of that.

"The research component is going to be very powerful for us," Russi told The Detroit News. "Not only basic research in health care, but applied research in the treatment of diseases. This is a huge mega-structure that we are talking about that will have (a great) impact in this area."

Making new discoveries

The university will break ground next year on a 157,300-square-foot Human Health Building that will house the nursing and health sciences schools and a public health clinic. Next up will be the new Oakland University William Beaumont School of Medicine building. Then OU will build a facility to house a specialized patient treatment center, drug trials and more research,

Russi said. All will be situated at Squirrel Road and Walton Boulevard.

"We are interested in doing research that impacts prevention and the cure of disease," Russi said. A key part will be working with OU's business incubator, OU INCubator, to "commercialize tech transfer and ... spin-off companies that hire people in these specialized areas."

While much fundraising is still needed, Oakland and its medical school partner, Beaumont Hospitals, are already cultivating the research collaborations that will be foundational to the park's success.

Both Oakland and Beaumont put up \$100,000 in seed money last year to establish joint studies between Beaumont clinical doctors and Oakland faculty that could lead to new discoveries and garner outside financial support once launched, said Kenneth J. Matzick, president and CEO of Beaumont Hospitals.

To date, 14 joint projects have been awarded money, including two with Dr. Joseph Guettler, a Beaumont orthopedic surgeon and sports medicine specialist.

Guettler is optimistic about the discoveries that will come out of the medical school and park.

"Working with the professors at OU gives experience to these projects and it strengthens the science," said Guettler, who had never done research with OU faculty until now. "It's a nice blend of clinicians at Beaumont interested in research and combining that with the power and experience that the scientists at OU bring."

County has potential for jobs

With the competition for federal research dollars fierce, Russi and Matzick said their medical partnership will pave the way for more funding.

Beaumont Hospitals received \$13.3 million in research dollars in 2008 and Oakland received \$17.4 million, for a combination of \$30.7 million, with about 43 percent of that coming from the federal government.

In contrast, the University of Michigan Health System, home to the nation's first university-owned hospital, had a research budget of \$342 million.

"Any genuinely new clinical trials that the new school brings to the area would be a big economic boon," said Alex Rosaen, consultant for the Lansing-based Anderson Economic Group. "This is because the funding for such trials comes from completely outside the area and cannot get here any other way."

The development of a medical research park is exciting because it's unconnected to the auto and manufacturing industry and therefore a source of new earnings, and it may have a high enough profile to help Oakland County attract future development, Rosaen said.

The Oakland Medical branding initiative aims to create new investment and leverage the county's specialty assets, such as the Beaumont Hospitals' building of a new proton beam

cancer therapy center in Royal Oak, one of only a handful in the nation. The center will attract patients and visitors from around the country, generating more than \$23.1 million in new economic activity per year, according to a study by Anderson Economic Group.

Oakland County already is No. 1 in the state for the number of health care establishments -- 4,300 -- and No. 2 behind Wayne County for the number of health care and life sciences jobs -- 93,000 -- according to the Anderson study.

But the county has the potential to add 45,000 of these high-paying jobs in a decade, making it one of the largest employment sectors, according to the study, which was commissioned by the county, Oakland University, Beaumont and McLaren Health Care Corp.

It's unclear how many new jobs the research park will create. "That will be driven by the nature and character of it," Russi said. "We are in the process of hiring administrators, deans, faculty and staff for the medical school. ... When you go beyond that and think about treatment facility and a research facility, you'll hire many more."

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