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TOP MIAMI-DADE NEWS



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OPTIMISTIC: Provost Mark Rosenberg, flanked by president Modesto Maidique. An FIU trustee has pledged \$10 million to the school's proposed medical school.

RAUL RUBIERA/HERALD STAFF

Florida International University's bid to establish South Florida's first public medical school received a \$10 million shot in the arm Thursday from a member of its board of trustees.

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Optometrist, entrepreneur and philanthropist Herbert A. Wertheim said he hopes his gift -- the single largest donation in FIU's history -- will create a groundswell of community support that will help persuade state authorities and lawmakers to endorse the proposed facility.

"We believe Miami is a big enough community that we really need to have two medical schools," Wertheim said by phone from California, where he is vacationing. "Our emphasis is going to be on prevention of disease and the public health aspect of disease. Miami-Dade County and Miami are really hurting for better medical care."

Also on Thursday, university officials unveiled a planned partnership between the anticipated medical school and four local hospitals -- Baptist Health, Mercy Hospital, Miami Children's Hospital and Mount Sinai Medical Center -- which together would provide clinical residencies for FIU's future medical students. The arrangement eliminates the need for FIU to build its own hospital.

FIU's hoped-for medical school still has a long road to travel before becoming reality, however. The twin announcements Thursday coincided with delivery of the school's formal proposal to the state's Board of Governors, which oversees Florida's public universities and colleges.

The board is in the midst of a comprehensive evaluation of the state's medical education needs. It hasn't yet determined if a new medical school should be part of Florida's strategy to address a projected shortage of doctors. The board isn't expected to make a decision on the proposal before next year at the earliest.

Predicting that approval by the Board of Governors and funding by the Legislature could take as long as two years, FIU president Modesto A. Maidique said the likely best-case scenario would have the first FIU medical school students in classrooms by fall 2007.

If the med school is approved, FIU would join the private University of Miami as the only South Florida schools producing medical doctors. Nova Southeastern University in Davie offers doctorates in osteopathy, a practice linked to chiropractic treatment.

The need for new doctors, however, is an imminent crisis, said FIU provost Mark Rosenberg.

"Florida is already importing 80 percent of its doctors," Rosenberg said. "Of the 2,500 new doctors certified in the state of Florida each year, only 500 graduate from Florida schools."

"Florida has the nation's oldest physician work force," he added. "Forty-two percent of our 47,000 doctors [statewide] are 55 or older, and a quarter of those are 65 or older."

A new South Florida medical school could help ease the coming crisis by encouraging local students to do their residencies, and later open their practices, close to home, Rosenberg said. It would also attract more minority candidates who could eventually serve the region's diverse ethnic communities.

'YOU LOSE THEM'

"If your doctors come from outside of Florida and they do residencies outside Florida, you lose them," Maidique said.

"If your doctors come from Florida and they do residencies here, the numbers show that 60 percent of them will stay. That's a much higher percentage than we have now."

Wertheim said it was critical to establish the medical school quickly to help meet that need.

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Wertheim, 63, has been an FIU trustee for 15 years. He is the founder of Brain Power Inc., which produces tints, dyes and chemicals for sunglasses and most of the instruments involved in manufacturing those products.

Privately and through the Herbert A. and Nicole J.D. Wertheim Family Foundation, he has donated millions to local institutions including FIU, Miami MetroZoo and public television station WPBT Channel 2. FIU's performing arts center already carries the Wertheim name.

He has offered his latest gift in the form of a challenge grant, hoping to attract another \$10 million in private local donations. With matching state funds, Wertheim hopes his gift will turn into a \$40 million boost for the facility.

'OVERALL SCHEME'

"That's not really very much money, in the overall scheme of our community," Wertheim said. "Ten million dollars is something we should be able to [raise] relatively quickly."

Measured against the costs of starting and operating a medical school, however, \$10 million represents only a modest start. The new medical school at Florida State University, approved in 2000, was begun with \$50.8 million from the state Legislature and \$9.6 million for the first year of operation.



Dr. Herbert Wertheim

Maidique predicted that once FIU's medical school is up and running, it would cost \$40 million annually to operate.

NEW BUILDING POSSIBLE

Maidique said a specific use for Wertheim's gift hasn't been identified, adding that a new building to house the planned medical school was one possibility.

"If we do that, it will carry his name," Maidique said.

Carlos Martini, project director for the medical school initiative, said FIU hopes to construct a relationship with local K-12 schools to encourage students at an early age to build interest in medical careers and strengthen their training in appropriate science courses.

"We want to give everybody in the region, to the extent of our ability, a chance to get that kind of background," Martini said.

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WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

- **The Board of Governors**, which oversees Florida's public universities and colleges, must approve the proposal, which FIU formally delivered Thursday. A decision is not expected before next year, at the earliest.
- **The Legislature** must approve funding for the school, after it is approved by the Board of Governors.
- **The soonest that students** could enroll in the first med school classes would be in fall 2007, but that assumes rapid approvals and full funding.