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Our Opinion: Dental school care

County and city need to invest in FAMU plan

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From its inception 124 years ago, Florida A&M University has made its mark producing significant numbers of graduates in fields such as business, allied health and pharmacy.

Now, the university seeks to help reverse the lack of routine dental care available in Florida's poor rural and underserved communities by opening its own dental school. Just as it has contributed to reversing the dismal representation of minority graduates in environmental sciences and other disciplines, FAMU President James Ammons believes that the university is positioned to fill this void.

Next week, he will share his vision with the State University System's Board of Governors, a critical step in moving this goal to fruition. We endorse FAMU's proposal and urge support from the city and county commission and the BOG.

Creation of a dental school at FAMU could have a significant economic impact on Leon County. Therefore, it's important that Dr. Ammons goes before the BOG with the full support of this community, where health care training has emerged as a driving force in job skills training and economic growth.

Such support signals that Tallahassee is serious about recognizing the benefits from partnering with Florida State, Florida A&M and Tallahassee Community College and solidifying its standing as vibrant place to live and work for generations to come.

Tallahassee city commissioners on Wednesday merely passed a resolution in favor of the dental school. They should have committed to the \$5 million requested by Dr. Ammons for the estimated \$76 million facility, including five area clinics, instead of focusing on in-kind services or funding.

The Leon County Commission should be more direct in committing its \$5 million buy-in when Dr. Ammons addresses the board Tuesday.

The proposal has gained the support of two critical health partners: Florida State's College of Medicine and Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare and its foundation.

Dr. John Fogarty, dean of FSU's medical school, said the college could partner with FAMU in many ways: identifying minority students interested in dental careers, possibly sharing facilities, such as labs, and possibly offering its biomedical faculty to teach.

Mark O'Bryant, president and CEO of Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare, said TMH would be interested in donating land on the TMH campus to FAMU, creating dental residency programs and applying for additional funding to support the residency programs.

Consistent dental care is critical throughout life and cost-effective. The health of infants and pregnant moms and children is affected in unexpected, sometimes chronic, even fatal ways when it is absent.

Dr. Ammons is proposing a community-based dental program in which students will spend the first two years on campus and continue their education thereafter in dental practices and clinics in underserved areas. FAMU's approach is unique and will combat against students' taking their degrees and moving on.

Based on a study by MGT of America, the college could provide big payoffs for the community in short-term construction jobs and economic activity as well as in ongoing economic impact and private-sector jobs, which universities are supposed to generate, just as any other incubator program does.

The University of Florida, the only state university with a dental school, wants to expand its program and facilities. The University of Central Florida also is poised to build a dental school, and already has significant private commitments.

At issue are disparities in dental care in the state, with many rural Florida communities, particularly in the Panhandle, going without access to routine dental care. A recent Pew Foundation study gave Florida an F for its efforts in providing health care to poor children. The Florida Department of Health has reported that only 20 percent of Florida's children eligible for dental care receive it.

On paper, Florida is expected to have enough dental graduates to serve the general population. The problem is these graduates don't want to practice in small, rural areas.

There's precedent for local government support of such projects. The city provided \$6.4 million to assist Danfoss-Turbocor to relocate here, including \$4.8 million to construct a building. It subsidized AirTran service to the tune of \$3.3 million over two years and underwrote Delta service by nearly half a million dollars. A closer comparison may be in the \$1.85 million city contribution to the Challenger Center plus \$2 million toward its construction on Kleman Plaza.

Leon County has contributed \$725,000 toward Vision 2020, a start-up capital venture fund, and has put \$10.7 million toward Gaines Street renovations in an effort to boost economic development in the area.

Granted, those funds were allocated in a more flush economy, but the current slowdown must not become a stumbling block for this community to help invest in such a worthwhile town-gown partnership that has the potential to contribute significantly to the big three: health, education and jobs.