

MSSU Board: 'Full Speed Ahead' on Med School

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Members of Missouri Southern State University's Board of Governors reiterated Friday their commitment to a partnership for a medical school on campus, even though they now know that those on the other end of the deal have yet to formally sign off on it.

Board member Dwight Douglas said local support for a \$10 million osteopathic medical school "has not waned," even in the face of an unexpected change in the leadership at Kansas City University of Medicine and Biosciences. KCUMB's longtime president, Karen Pletz, had committed to work with MSSU to bring a satellite med school to Joplin. Pletz was fired in December, and the acting president of the institution on Wednesday disclosed that the deal still requires approval by the KCUMB board of trustees to proceed.

COMMITMENT REMAINS

"There has been nobody (locally) back off their commitments," said Douglas, who sits on the board's committee on the project and also serves as legal counsel for Freeman Heath System in Joplin. "I think all the people we have involved are fully committed, and from our standpoint, it's full speed ahead."

H. Danny Weaver, the acting president of KCUMB, also said on Wednesday that he remains confident his board will formally endorse the plan. But even with that approval, what is almost certain to

change is the project's timetable.

KCUMB and Missouri Southern initially were eyeing August 2012 as the opening date for the medical school's freshman class. But that opening could get pushed back six months to a year, depending on how quickly KCUMB installs a permanent president. The permanent president must apply for accreditation of the new satellite campus, Weaver noted.

Douglas said the leadership change would probably push the opening date to August of 2013.

The board also approved a recommendation to hire Crawford Architects of Kansas City as the architect for the project. Crawford's proposal would charge 6.5 percent of the cost to complete the building.



An aerial shot of the MSSU campus.

SAFETY VALVE

Board member Charles McGinty asked whether the contract with Crawford contained a release provision, and board attorney Jon Dermott said it did.

Douglas said Missouri Southern is looking to raise \$10 million to finance construction of a 35,000-square-foot building that it plans to rent to KCUMB for a satellite campus as an osteopathic medical school. In exchange for a “reasonable reimbursement,” MSSU will provide space for classes and labs, with the Kansas City university to provide “all instruction, administrative infrastructure, and required support to make the program a success.” MSSU will retain naming rights for the building.

The committee, Douglas said, has already received \$2.5 million in pledges toward the construction.

The board also voiced approval but did not vote on a decision by the university’s foundation to secure a \$250,000 loan to finance some of the initial planning, including hiring the architect to draw up plans for the building.

The decision to draw the loan drew some questioning. Faculty senate President Roger Chelf during his report to the board said the No. 1 issue with faculty remains finding the resources to hire long-term, tenure-track professors, rather than staffing the university with one-year hires.

“I don’t know that they are opposed to (the loan), so much as they desire to fill classrooms with qualified teachers,” Chelf said. “Yes, we are concerned over (MSSU’s) long-term future, but we’re also concerned about next year.”

After the meeting, Douglas said he felt the board is being prudent in securing the loan, despite the possibility that KCUMB’s board could nix the deal.

“The loan is not one we will draw down until we need it,” he said. “We will be prudent in our expenses until we get a firm commitment from their board.”

Chelf said after the meeting that he believes faculty concerns are “legitimate.”

“The med school is not a done deal, and we’re a quarter-million dollars in debt because of it,” he said.

KCUMB statement

The acting president of Kansas City University of Medicine and Biosciences said Wednesday that a planned medical school for Joplin is still a go, at least for now. H. Danny Weaver was in Joplin on Wednesday to meet with local leadership on the proposal. A decision by the KCUMB board on the partnership is expected by April 1.