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ISM hopes to open in 36 to 48 months

Systems medicine group to launch recruiting effort for top national scientist

By [Richard Ripley](#)

The Institute for Systems Medicine Planning Authority, fresh from persuading the Washington Legislature to approve a long-term multimillion-dollar funding package, hopes to open its planned biomedical research institute in Spokane's University District within the next 36 to 48 months.

As part of its drive to open the nonprofit institute by then, the authority has begun preparing to recruit a chief scientific officer whose name would resonate in the medical and biomedical communities nationally, says Lewis Rumpler, its chief operating officer.

Earlier this year, the Legislature approved diversion of 0.2 percent of the sales-and-use taxes collected in a Washington county in which the state creates a Health Sciences and Services Authority, Rumpler says. The ISM Planning Authority expects that county will be Spokane County, and it's counting on the revenue stream from such a tax diversion plus funds from private and corporate sources to raise a total of \$55 million by a year from now, says Rumpler. He says it needs such a war chest to attract the chief scientific officer it wants.

Moreover, the authority is in the early stages of forging plans to construct a building here with at least 150,000 square feet of floor space to house the institute, Rumpler says. Also, he says it is working to draft an agreement that would meet the needs of its five partners, Providence Health & Services, Empire Health Services, Washington State University, Gonzaga University, and the Seattle-based Institute for Systems Biology. He says the authority has met with its partners, private developers, and other nonprofit organizations to discuss the institute's space needs.

The authority has said it needs to raise \$110 million in the institute's first five years to attract to Spokane as many as 250 highly qualified biomedical scientists, mathematicians, computer scientists, engineers, physicists, and others. It says those experts would help the health-care and education sectors here blaze new trails into medical frontiers opened by the mapping of the human genome.

Experts believe that the mapping of the genome, completed just a few years ago, will enable medicine to become more predictive and less reactive as researchers discover and study genetic anomalies that can leave people vulnerable to illness. It's anticipated that new technologies will be developed to keep people who have such genetic variations from getting sick, Rumpler says. Yet, because of the sheer size and complexity of the human genome, which includes some 25,000 to 30,000 genes, a tremendous amount of work, including intensive computer work, will have to be done to find and understand those genetic variations. Rumpler says that as such efforts change the world of medicine, communities that attract experts in a wide range of disciplines will augment their health-care and education sectors, while those that don't will see those sectors stagnate.

The authority says the institute "will conduct pioneering research into life-threatening diseases using an uncommon research approach ... to better understand the underlying biology of disease." It says the institute will focus on cardiovascular disease, cancer, and neurodegenerative and metabolic diseases.

A big chunk of the \$55 million the authority is seeking now could come from diversion of part of the sales-and-use taxes collected in Spokane County, Rumpler says. The diverted funds would come from the state's 6.5 percent part of the sales-and-use tax, rather than from taxes that go to local government agencies, and the sales-and-use tax rate here wouldn't go up because of the diversion.

That funding mechanism would pull in an estimated \$25 million to \$75 million in Spokane County over the authorized 15 years, depending on how fast sales-tax receipts grow here, Rumpler says.

"It's a very nice piece of money," he says, but adds that the institute, through some kind of financing

mechanism, is hoping to tap up front a substantial amount of those funds, much as cities and counties issue bonds to pay for infrastructure and pay off the bonds over time. The planning authority believes it could raise about \$19 million up front from the tax-diversion receipts, Rumpler says.

"That's not bad," he says. Yet, he adds, "We've had some meetings with banks here in the community. I'm hoping that we're going to get closer to \$30 million."

The planning authority also hopes to raise \$9 million in federal funds and \$3 million from the state Life Sciences Discovery Fund, and it's counting on its chairman, Spokane developer John Stone, to raise \$5 million from private sources.

"He's raised \$1 million right now," Rumpler says.

Those amounts add up to \$47 million, and the planning authority hopes to garner from partnerships and corporate contributors the rest of the \$55 million, Rumpler says.

The tax-diversion legislation provides that by early next year the state will create the new Health Sciences and Services Authority (HSSA) to oversee the use of the diverted funds. Rumpler says the Washington state Higher Education Coordinating Board will accept applications later this year to establish the HSSA. The deadline for applications is Dec. 31, after which the HEC Board will have two months to decide where to establish the agency, Rumpler says.

The HEC Board could establish the HSSA in any county in Washington that has fewer than 1 million people, Rumpler says. Yet, he believes it would be established here because the ISM planning authority and Spokane's Project Access, which also has lobbied for approval of the tax-diversion legislation, would be "highly credible organizations" in the HSSA application process because they lobbied for the legislation, Rumpler says.

Project Access, a doctor-led nonprofit partnership here of 845 volunteer physicians, other health-care practitioners, all of Spokane County's hospitals, and many pharmacists, provides comprehensive medical care to low-income, uninsured county residents.

"We're supportive, as part of the medical community," of the effort to open the institute as a way to advocate for "state-of-the-art care," says John Driscoll, Project Access' executive director. Project Access also supports formation of the HSSA as a tool to obtain "some derivative funding to continue our mission," he says.

If the HSSA is established here, Spokane's mayor would appoint three of the agency's board members, the Spokane County commissioners would appoint three, and the governor would appoint three, Rumpler says. Those nine board members then could appoint up to another five board members, but also could choose not to appoint any additional members. The board would approve any plan to borrow against future sales-and-use tax diversion revenue to generate start-up funds.

The planning authority is working now to name a separate strategic advisory board that would recruit the chief scientific officer, Rumpler says.

"We have been discussing the chairmanship with a very eminent scientist," he says. He declines to name the scientist, but claims that the other eight board members would be scientists "of the same caliber as the chairman." Strategic advisory board members are being asked to serve for two years in case the chief scientific officer wants the board to continue as a scientific advisory panel after it completes its recruiting effort, Rumpler says.

He doubts that any members of the panel will be from the Spokane area.

"It's hard to find anybody here who doesn't have an interest in the institute," Rumpler says. Yet, it's likely that the strategic advisory board would talk with representatives of the authority's five partners, such as Dr. Katherine R. Tuttle, medical and scientific director of Providence Medical Research Center, at Sacred Heart Medical Center, he says.

The partnership agreement for the institute also is expected to be completed in the next 12 months, Rumpler says. The institute could provide cash to help medical centers and schools pay attractive salaries to incoming scientists, to provide joint appointments to them in both health care and academia, and to enable them to do research.

While Rumpler and his staff of three don't need much office space now, the institute will need a lot, and that's why the authority is planning for a building, Rumpler says.

"We need, at a minimum, 150,000 square feet of space," he says.

The planning authority has suggested to WSU, which oversees development of the Riverpoint Higher Education Park campus east of downtown, the possibility that the institute would develop a building jointly here with the Pullman school, Rumpler says. He says WSU's response was, "It's a very interesting idea. It requires more consideration and examination. It would be predicated on (WSU's) program development in Spokane."

The planning authority hasn't talked with the University of Washington about joint development or occupancy of a building, but the addition of 20 UW School of Medicine first-year students in Spokane, which the Legislature also approved in its most recent session, means the planning authority and the UW might at least discuss developing a building together, Rumpler says. That would be even more likely if the UW's 20 first-year medical students at WSU's Pullman campus were moved to Spokane, Rumpler says.

Still, it usually takes six years for the state to develop a major building, with planning money, design funds, and construction dollars appropriated in separate successive bienniums.

"The challenge is that we can't wait six years," Rumpler says.

Contact Richard Ripley at (509) 344-1261 or via e-mail at editor@spokanejournal.com.

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