SPOKESMANREVIEW.COM Tuesday, August 1, 2006

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Scientist's help worth a million

Institute for Systems Medicine a go

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March 18, 2006

Spokane leaders rarely can float an idea to state legislators and come away with a million dollars in funding.

But that's what happened during the last session in Olympia – with significant help from a renowned West Side scientist.

The Spokane proposal landing $1 million in development money was the recently hatched Institute for Systems Medicine, a private research center backed by the area's universities and hospitals.

quick bio

Dr. Leroy Hood

•*Recognized* as one of the world's leading scientists in molecular biotechnology and genomics.

•*Inventions* include the automated DNA sequencer.

•*Founded* and directs the Institute for Systems Biology in Seattle.

The man who made a critical difference in getting the startup money was Dr. Leroy Hood, founder of the Institute for Systems Biology, based in Seattle.

> Like Hood's own private research center in Seattle, Spokane's ISM expects to hire top-notch researchers and work with private companies to develop new health treatments and medicines.

Hood inspired Spokane leaders three years ago when he told them Spokane, like Seattle, could encourage development of innovative medical companies.

After giving that speech at a downtown meeting, Hood stepped back. His interest in helping the Spokane effort changed, he said, as he saw very strong support among Spokane's community leaders. Without that unified commitment, Hood said he would have continued to watch from the sidelines.

Brian Pitcher, chancellor of Washington State University Spokane, credits Hood with playing a primary role in landing the million dollars for the ISM. The money was set aside for WSU, which will be the fiscal agent for the state funds, said Pitcher.

"That Lee Hood is closely involved with this and is looking to help it develop is an important statement," said Pitcher. "His (involvement) says it's not just another project."

Hood, who grew up in Montana, has been called one of the major figures in the development of molecular biology. He launched the Institute for Systems Biology after leaving the University of

Washington. Among his accomplishments was a key role in developing the automated DNA sequencer, a device to create proteins.

Spokane developer John Stone, a proponent of the ISM, said Hood carries weight with budget writers. "His support shows that this is a good concept and is real," Stone said.

Added Stone: "Lee's not going to waste his time and energy on something that is not world-class" in scope.

Hood, who's 66, said his current relationship with the Spokane group is as a high-level adviser. He said he'll also play a role in recruiting a scientist to become the first director of the Institute for Systems Medicine. That hire will be pivotal in obtaining other money and in building relationships with other organizations, he said.

The formal launch of the ISM will come after Spokane leaders round up $2.5 million in funding, said Lewis Rumpler, a coordinator for the committee that's backing the idea.

The total to date is nearly $2 million, said Rumpler. In addition to the state money, the institute has raised $480,000 from Washington State University, Gonzaga University, Empire Health Services and Providence Health Care and Services. Spokane County has contributed $250,000 in economic development money, and Avista Corp. has committed $100,000 in cash and in-kind services, said Rumpler.

Rumpler and Stone said the next step for the Institute for Systems Medicine is a defined focus for its scientific research.

Stone said it's critical that the ISM have a clear notion of what it can accomplish. He also said the bottom line is to have research that develops actual products, not just research reports and studies.

Hood noted that he expects the Spokane center and his own to collaborate and share some projects.

"There should be some overlap between them," he said. The Spokane institute would focus on medical treatment, while his Institute for Systems Biology will use technology to better understand the complex systems all organisms are made of, he said.