

The value of medical research ...

New institute will bring prosperity

The economic future of any region depends, in part, upon how well a community understands and leverages its resources to achieve the greater good.

Our community is blessed with exceptional resources in health care and higher education. Together, these two fields contribute significantly to the social and economic well-being of the region.

For instance, numerous reports have concluded that health-care delivery is the largest economic engine in Spokane County, contributing more than 20 percent of the gross domestic product and 12 percent of high-wage employment. It also is estimated that more than 50,000 students are enrolled in our regional higher education system at any one time.

The importance of health care and education to the region's current economy is plain to see, but much more is possible for the future. By investing wisely and leveraging these engines of growth, we can create greater opportunities and help distinguish our region to the world.

The Institute for Systems Medicine (ISM) is just such an investment. This proposed nonprofit scientific institute will conduct pioneering, interdisciplinary research into important diseases, such as multiple sclerosis and heart disease. The hope of promising discoveries and local clinical trials will help energize connections between health care and higher education institutions. Joint hospital and university appointments and coordinated recruitment and retention of top-notch physician researchers and academic faculty will strengthen the bond—and significant new grant funding is likely to flow from the resulting collaborations.

How can I be so sure? The ISM is modeled after the highly successful T-Gen (Translational Genomics) Research Institute, in Phoenix, which I had the opportunity to tour several months ago. T-Gen was formed in 2002 through a partnership between the University of Arizona, the University of Arizona Medical Center, and the Mayo Clinic. Today, it boasts a staff of 200 world-class scientists and technicians and already has spun off several biotech

companies based on its medical research.

The ISM is such a powerful idea that it has attracted enormous support and assistance from Dr. Leroy Hood, of the Institute of Systems Biology (ISB) in Seattle. Hood is a world-renowned scientist and co-founder of Amgen. ISB will be a partner in the development and operation of the ISM.

I want to applaud the work of the founding partners through whom the ISM is being advanced: Lane Rawlins, president of Washington State University; the Rev. Robert Spitzer, president of Gonzaga University; Jeff Nelson, CEO of Empire Health Services; and Skip Davis, chief executive of Providence Health Care. These individuals and their institutions, along with Spokane developer John Stone, current chair of the Institute for Systems Medicine Planning Authority, have done a magnificent job in making the institute a reality. My employer, Avista Corp., and Spokane County are founding sponsors of ISM and have since been joined by many others in

support. Notably, Gov. Chris Gregoire expressed her support for the ISM, and Sen. Lisa Brown helped secure state support for planning and development.

Much work, however, remains to be done to realize this opportunity. Significant financial hurdles need to be overcome to launch the ISM successfully. It is a significant undertaking, but the opportunity is too great to ignore. You can learn more at www.ismedicine.org. Then, please share your support of this important initiative with all of our elected officials. As former U.S. House Speaker Tip O'Neill once said, "All politics is local." Broad-based support will be critical to making ISM a reality.

With all of the effort, we have the very real chance to create meaningful, diverse, and sustainable benefits—for prosperity and for hope—throughout the Inland Northwest for now and generations to come.



Guest
Commentary

Scott Morris

Scott Morris is president and chief operating officer of Avista Corp. He also is a member of the ISM steering committee.