

Joint project for Akron

Akron's three hospital systems, the University of Akron and NEOUCOM will take the first step toward developing a premier orthopedic research institute

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Published on Sunday, Feb 03, 2008

A venture among rival hospitals in town aims to put Akron on the map as a national leader for fixing and preventing orthopedic problems.

The city's three hospital systems are joining with the University of Akron and the Northeastern Ohio Universities Colleges of Medicine and Pharmacy in a proposal to launch a research center focused on bones, joints and connective tissues. High-level talks involving these and other partners could lead to a multimillion-dollar research facility within the city's biomedical corridor, which stretches from Akron General Medical Center, around downtown and to Akron City Hospital. A major step toward creating the Orthopaedic Research Institute of Northeastern Ohio begins on Monday, when the partners are expected to file a detailed grant application seeking \$27.5 million from a new Third Frontier state initiative called the Ohio Research Scholars Program.

The money would jump-start recruitment by luring national research leaders to Akron for six endowed positions, according to a statement of intent filed last month by the University of Akron, the lead applicant.

"We want this to happen because it will result in quality research that will change people's lives," said Dr. Dennis Weiner, chairman of orthopedic surgery at Akron Children's Hospital and a leading organizer of the venture.

Supporters hope the proposed research center — called ORINEO for short — can transform Akron into an orthopedic powerhouse, similar to the way Cleveland garners an international reputation for cardiology.

The partners want Akron to compete for talent and funding with leading orthopedic research programs, such as those at the Mayo Clinic and the University of Rochester.

Organizers say the proposal builds on the region's strengths of providing orthopedic care at Akron's hospitals, biomedical research at NEOUCOM and polymer research at UA.

"If we want to continue to grow the economic vitality and serve as an engine, then we need to look around and see what our greatest strengths are," Summa Foundation President and Chief Executive August A. Napoli Jr. said. "Why not pursue it?"

If the institute materializes, Akron Children's Hospital and crosstown rivals Akron General and Summa Health System would put aside competition for orthopedic research and development.

Attracting federal funds

"It just makes sense that if we can be a little more transparent and collaborative with these efforts, we can get a synergistic effect and perhaps attract federal money," said Dr. Mark C. Leeson, chairman of the orthopedic departments at Akron General and NEOUCOM.

"We've all been doing research over the years. This would be nice to add this to the noncompetitive side of the ledger for the betterment of the community, our patients and the future generations."

The proposed institute would allow doctors at the three hospital systems to work alongside academic researchers to bridge the gap from laboratory discovery to patient use, said Dr. Walter E. Horton, NEOUCOM's vice president for research and professor of anatomy.

The ultimate goal: Find breakthroughs in the lab and transform them into products and procedures that lead to new business ventures, local jobs and better patient care.

"It's just a wonderful opportunity for us to really make this connection with the clinical community and have a direct impact on health care," Horton said.

Orthopedic demand up

The demand for blockbuster orthopedic breakthroughs is great — and it's growing as years of wear and tear take a toll on baby boomers' aging bodies.

Musculoskeletal conditions affect more than 107 million U.S. adults and carry a price tag topping \$849 billion annually in terms of medical care, lost work days and other direct and indirect costs, experts say.

To capitalize on the growing need, ORINEO organizers first want to lure top researchers to Akron with Ohio Research Scholars Program money.

The grant is jointly offered by the state's Department of Development and the Ohio Board of Regents, with the goal of increasing the "clusters of research excellence" statewide.

The lead applicant must be a state university, which then secures matching funds.

Partners in the Akron proposal have been meeting regularly to determine how to run the orthopedic research institute, as well as how to share the expenses and potential revenue from any discoveries.

At the urging of Ohio Chancellor Eric D. Fingerhut, UA recently expanded the research partners listed on the application to include Case Western Reserve University and the Cleveland Clinic.

Other partners are Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co. and several biomedical businesses in the Akron area that have received state support in the past, including Theken Surgical LLC and SpineMatrix Inc.

But there's stiff competition for limited state dollars.

According to the letters of intent filed with the state last month, more than 40 proposals are seeking nearly \$750 million, but only \$150 million is available.

A decision is expected in May.

Unsuccessful applicants can apply for other grants this year, Third Frontier Commission Executive Director Norman Chagnon said.

Indeed, the Akron partners say they're dedicated to finding other funding to make the orthopedic project a reality, regardless of the outcome of the Ohio Research Scholars Program application.

"Something will happen, and I think it will happen in stages," NEOUCOM's Horton said. "Pieces will fall into place as funding becomes available for different pieces. . . . I would be very surprised if there isn't something tangible even within a year or 18 months."

And orthopedics might be just the start.

University of Akron, NEOUCOM and Akron's hospital leaders also are talking about launching an academic health center, University of Akron President Luis Proenza said.

The concept would expand NEOUCOM's reach by bringing a university-based medical school to Akron.

"What many people would like to see is that more of what goes on at NEOUCOM can happen at Akron," Proenza said.

The proposed orthopedic research institute "would be a natural part of the academic health center," he said. As the orthopedic research institute proposal moves forward, five potential sites within the city's biomedical corridor have been identified.

No decision has been made about whether it would be housed in a new or renovated facility.

"There are spaces in the corridor that could be temporary spaces until something was actually developed," said Akron Deputy Mayor Robert Bowman, who estimates a site could be selected by midyear.

Possible sites

One potential site is the northwest section of the University of Akron campus, near a planned \$10 million National Polymer Innovation Center, Proenza said.

Another possibility: The institute could be built on North Main Street if the Summit County Department of Job and Family Services is relocated.

But wherever it ends up, the proposed institute is "a great vision for where our community should go," Summit County Executive Russ Pry said.

"Our economy has changed as we become known more and more for what we provide as far as medicine and the health-care industry," Pry said.

The proposed orthopedic institute "is the kind of thing that should then attract research dollars to the community and change what we would be known for worldwide," he said.

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