

Garamendi plan worth a look

Proposal would fast-track med school planned for UC Merced.

Friday, Jan. 09, 2009

Lt. Gov. John Garamendi has offered an intriguing proposal to fast-track the medical school planned for the University of California at Merced. Garamendi's option may make sense because the UC administration is considering a slowdown of the planning for the medical school because of the economic downturn.

Garamendi, a member of the UC Board of Regents, thinks his plan will gain support because it's less expensive, and would turn out doctors much more quickly than the current medical proposal. He unveiled the revised plan this week, and was in Fresno Thursday to discuss it with local leaders. Garamendi will ask that it be discussed at the regents' meeting next week.

We have been longtime supporters of a medical school in the San Joaquin Valley, and we are concerned about UC's reported decision to pull back on the plan. A medical school will still be needed here long after the current economic troubles have passed. Delaying it will only make it more costly to build.

UC has long neglected the Valley and regents built a campus in Merced only after intense pressure from those living in the region. But a partially built campus is not enough, and UC leaders must make a stronger commitment to funding ongoing operations and enhancing programs, including a medical school.

It is not acceptable for UC to create roadblocks to building out the Merced campus. We are very troubled by the prospect of the Valley getting more broken promises from the UC administration and regents about their support of programs at the Merced campus.

While we aren't ready to sign onto the Garamendi medical school plan, we think it's deserving of serious consideration. We'd like to hear more details, especially a firm commitment that the latest proposal would be of the highest quality.

Garamendi wants to save money by eliminating the research portion of the medical school. He wants the university to develop a "fast-track" curriculum in which high school graduates could earn medical degrees in as little as five years. He said the program could be ready to go by the fall of 2010, which is three years sooner than the current plan.

The Valley already faces critical shortages of doctors, particularly in specialty areas. Many Valley residents who need specialized care must travel to the Bay Area or Southern California to find it. Having a medical school in the Valley would help alleviate that costly and sometimes dangerous situation.

There would also be an economic benefit to getting more doctors to serve the region. A UC study says the Valley has lost more than \$845 million because insured patients living here were forced to go outside the area for medical care they couldn't get locally.

If the Garamendi plan is the best one available, let's take a serious look at it.