

Sen. Smith: “Health, Science and Wisconsin”

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Sen. Jeff Smith writes about the unique partnership between the Mayo Clinic and UW-Eau Claire that could make it “the center for rural healthcare in Wisconsin.”

MADISON, WI - Dr. Tim Nelson of Mayo Clinic walked the halls of the Wisconsin State Capitol along with UW-Eau Claire Chancellor Jim Schmidt. They visited 11 offices in a marathon day of lobbying for UWEC’s new science and health sciences building project in the current budget.

We all know how important health care access is to keep people healthy. Rural communities in Wisconsin are especially difficult to serve. Critical care hospitals in small cities throughout Wisconsin struggle to keep doctors, nurses and other health professionals. Clinics can be a long drive for many and out of reach for others. And that’s if economic circumstances allow for families in rural areas to afford a healthcare plan.

While Medicaid expansion has been the biggest focus of the budget process so far, it wasn’t what Dr. Nelson and Chancellor Schmidt were talking to legislators about. In Dr. Nelson’s words, Mayo Clinic wants to “make Eau Claire the center for rural healthcare in Wisconsin.” You see, Dr. Nelson and Chancellor Schmidt are collaborating on a project that could make

Wisconsin a leader for rural healthcare research.



Mayo Clinic is a unique healthcare system – their mission is symbolized by three shields representing patient care, education and research. Mayo Clinic already provides top-notch patient care in Eau Claire. In 2017, Mayo Clinic and UW-Eau Claire entered into a master collaborative research agreement, making UWEC one of only two undergraduate campuses in the United States with access to Mayo Clinic’s incredible resources.

UWEC is seeking to replace their aged and inefficient science building on campus. Phillips Science Hall was built nearly 60 years ago. The building costs \$500,000 per year to maintain and accounts for 34% of all UWEC’s unscheduled maintenance costs. With single pane windows, over 20 air exchangers, leaking pipes and inadequate spaces for equipment in the 21st Century, this building has outlived the needs of more than 5,500 students who pass through its halls every year.

The UW System is an economic engine for our state because of the unique focuses and experiences in which they specialize. We need to support funding priorities that ensure these campuses have the facilities they need. UWEC’s project has a broader purpose and creates a new blueprint for all other UW schools to follow by creating innovative partnerships, like their commitment to advancing health care research with Mayo Clinic. This is an excellent investment for us to make in our state.

World renowned Mayo Clinic Health System is based just over the river in Rochester, Minnesota. They recognize if they are to meet their own three-shield mission of providing cutting

edge scientific methods for solving our healthcare needs they need a research facility and new students to learn modern methods.

Mayo Clinic Health System’s footprint goes beyond Eau Claire. They employ 8,400 people in 19 communities spread across western Wisconsin. With all that in mind, Mayo Clinic pledged a \$13.7 million goal to help pay for the new health and health services building at UWEC. This is the largest private donation for a UW academic building outside of Madison and Milwaukee in our state’s history. They see an opportunity to invest in Wisconsin and turn the UWEC science building into something even more special that can ultimately have worldwide healthcare implications.



Exciting, right? Groundbreaking healthcare research in the heart of rural Wisconsin and a huge economic boost for Wisconsin, beyond the \$2.2 billion impact we already see from Mayo Clinic. But we could lose our opportunity.

Back in April, a tie vote resulted in no projects being approved by the State Building Commission for the first time in Wisconsin state history. Politics has clearly reared its ugly head and put many important decisions at risk, but this one can’t wait for the grandstanding to end. We can’t afford to sit and let this opportunity with Mayo Clinic pass us by because of political games.

If we don’t put political egos aside and approve this project, we could miss our chance to make Wisconsin the epicenter of medical research for rural healthcare. We are truly grateful for this opportunity offered by a world health leader and we cannot afford to miss it. Please call your legislators and tell them, we can make this a great victory for Wisconsin in 2019.

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