

Akron institutions launch bioresearch enterprise

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Five Akron-area institutions and a national foundation want to transform their city's economic future by launching a research institute to pioneer next-generation medical innovations.

The BioInnovation Institute in Akron would attract big-name researchers -- and their multimillion-dollar research grants -- to Akron

Initially, the researchers could unify and build on biomaterial and orthopedic technology research already present in and around the city. Eventually, the researchers could bring national industry and global research institutions to Akron.

The institute founders -- Akron Children's Hospital, Akron General Health System, Northeastern Ohio Universities Colleges of Medicine and Pharmacy (NEOUCOM), Summa Health System and the University of Akron -- are to announce their plan this morning. They already have collected \$80 million in state, academic and philanthropic grant commitments for their first five years.

"This reflects a transformational economic development opportunity to bring together the academic, research and health service strengths of the five partners," said Luis Proenza, president of the University of Akron.

The founders' long-term goal is to build the institute into a full-fledged academic health center, the likes of one at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, to which Worcester Polytechnic Institute contributes its engineering know-how.

The medical school alone attracts more than \$176 million in research funding each year.

"The first step in that direction is a highly focused, bioinnovation institute," Proenza said.

The institute would be made up of five pieces, said Dr. Lois Margaret Nora, president and dean of NEOUCOM's college of medicine:

- Orthopedic Research Institute of Northeast Ohio -- The five bioinnovation institute founders plus Case Western Reserve University and the Cleveland Clinic's Lerner Research Institute, which got together early this year to win an \$8.7 million Ohio Research Scholars grant from the state's Third Frontier Project.
- A center for biomaterials in medicine, which builds on the materials and polymer science and engineering strengths of the University of Akron, and on the orthopedic research at the three hospitals.
- A center for health care training, which would use simulation and standardized patient training materials to educate most types of health care professionals, such as doctors, nurses, technicians and paramedics.
- A medical device concept laboratory where prototypes could be created and tested.
- A center for clinical trials for drugs and devices.

Eventually, the institute could include a cluster of orthopedic and biomaterials companies, said Baiju Shah, president and chief executive of BioEnterprise, the region's health care company developer.

BioEnterprise has helped the institute founders with their strategic plan. "The vision is to create something that's nationally distinctive in Akron," said Aram Nerpouni, the BioEnterprise vice president who will be interim director of the institute until a permanent director is found.

The founding institutions have been talking about the institute for about two years, Proenza said. The founders and Akron government and business executives approached the Knight Foundation in Miami for support in January.

The foundation quickly got behind the institute's goals, Proenza said. It was created by Akron natives John S. and James L. Knight to help their hometown. At one time the Knight family's publishing empire included the Beacon Journal in Akron.

Eventually, the foundation committed \$20 million for five years to pay for the institute, he said.

BioEnterprise and a planning consultancy helped the founders develop several ways to build the institute. "In addition, the Knight Foundation and state of Ohio have been very involved in this process," Nerpouni said.

Institute founders plan to search nationwide for a permanent director, who then will begin recruiting researchers.

Though the three Akron hospitals compete at some level, they also have a history of working together.

"We have joint residency programs," Summa's Strauss said. "Akron General and Summa have opened a long-term acute care hospital. Children's [Hospital] has relationships with both of us around neonatal care."

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