

Pharmacy school up to Perry

A&M-Kingsville bill awaits signature of governor.

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EXPRESS-NEWS AUSTIN BUREAU

AUSTIN — Two lawmakers have won legislative approval of a measure to create a school of pharmacy at Texas A&M University-Kingsville described by supporters as the first state-funded professional school in South Texas.

The Texas Senate on Thursday sent the proposal, House Bill 1640, to Gov. Rick Perry.

"I'm exceptionally excited," said A&M-Kingsville President Marc Cisneros, who had tears in his eyes after the Senate action.

Cisneros, a retired Army general who became president of the Kingsville campus three years ago, said he is "highly confident" Perry will sign the measure into law.



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Perry spokesman Gene Acuña said that while Perry has not yet reviewed the measure, "the governor certainly supports expanding higher education opportunities for all Texans."

If signed into law, the school would admit its first class of 50 graduate pharmacy students for the fall 2005 semester.

Sponsoring Sen. Carlos Truan, wearing an A&M-Kingsville tie, said he and originating sponsor Rep. Irma Rangel, D-Kingsville, are counting on \$1.35 million in startup funding for the school being included in the 2002-03 budget being written by a House-Senate conference committee.

The measure authorizes \$11.6 million in tuition revenue bonds toward building a 47,000-square-foot facility for the school that would be ready for occupancy in May 2005.

Annual state expenditures for operating the school are projected to increase to \$3.5 million by 2004 and \$5.6 million in 2006.

According to a state report, there is one pharmacist for every 1,770 residents of the Texas-Mexico border region, 32 percent less than the statewide ratio — a gap attributed to rapid population growth and difficulties recruiting and retaining pharmacists.

As did Truan, Cisneros credited Rangel with persuading lawmakers

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to fund the new school in a tight budget session.

Rangel personally made the case to House Speaker Pete Laney, D-Hale Center, and acting Lt. Gov. Bill Ratliff, R-Mount Pleasant.

Rangel, chairwoman of the Higher Education Committee in the House, said: "We were able to persuade them it's about time South Texas receives a professional school."

Professional schools are schools of law, medicine, pharmacy, veterinary medicine, architecture, dentistry and the like that subsequently require passage of a state test to practice.

Cisneros said he soon hopes to double or triple the 17 prepharmacy students now attending the Kingsville university.

Some 200 prepharmacy students in South Texas community colleges and universities now must leave the region to complete their training, Cisneros said.

The state projects 430 job openings per year for pharmacists until 2008. Four state pharmacy schools now produce 315 pharmacists a year.

In his appearances before legislative committees, Cisneros reminded lawmakers of the low number of doctoral programs in South Texas in comparison with the rest of Texas.

Institutions in South Texas, including San Antonio, have nine doctoral programs. Universities in Central Texas have 179 doctoral programs, while institutions in East Texas have 53, those in North Texas have 103, and others in West Texas have 65 — all of them at Texas Tech University in Lubbock and the University of Texas at El Paso.

"Texas will only be as strong as its weakest region," Cisneros said. "If we're going to talk the talk, we've got to walk the walk."

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