August 28, 2014

Better Together: A United Vision for Spokane’s Academic Health Science and Research Center

Dear Greater Spokane Incorporated (GSI) Executive Committee and Spokane Community Leadership:

Thank you for inviting us to meet with you recently to discuss the UW’s plans for expanding medical education and research in Spokane. GSI has been an indomitable force in making the community’s vision to create a world-class, research-intensive Academic Health Science and Research Center, anchored by Spokane’s four-year medical school, a reality. As we discussed, a great deal of progress has been made to date, and we stand at the ready to partner with you and the higher education and health care communities to help advance the region’s economy.

Two months ago, at a crossroads and concerned that Spokane was on the verge of becoming a divided battleground, Spokane community leaders approached President Elson Floyd, Regent Mike Worthy, and University of Washington (UW) leadership with an urgent request: come together with Spokane community leaders to make Spokane’s medical school the nation’s premier successful model of university and medical education collaboration.

The University of Washington embraced this invitation with enthusiasm and optimism. We want to thank Scott Morris, Mike Wilson, Roger Woodworth, and Anne Marie Axworthy for facilitating and participating in, on behalf of the Spokane community, the first two meetings we have had to date. Their leadership and insight have come to symbolize for us the community’s resolve to make Spokane’s medical school a transformative centerpiece for medical education and the region’s economy.

While we were encouraged early on in the process that all parties were acting in good faith to find reasonable solutions to work together, recent communications with Washington State University indicate no desire to continue discussions for several more weeks. We have expressed our concerns with the delay to WSU, Scott Morris, and Mike Wilson. However, given this, we believe it necessary to make clear the University of Washington’s steadfast commitment to enhancing the existing partnership with an innovative, collaborative model of medical
education in Spokane, including key elements of a new model, which was proposed during July discussions with Scott Morris, Mike Wilson, President Floyd and Regent Worthy.

The University of Washington is fully prepared to collaborate with the community’s vision to create a Spokane Academic and Health Sciences Research Center that combines the University of Washington’s #1 ranked primary care, rural medicine and family medicine medical education programs and internationally-recognized life sciences research strengths with Washington State University’s outstanding interdisciplinary medical science programs and global animal health research prowess.

By working together and focusing on our individual core strengths, Spokane’s Academic and Health Sciences Research Center will be more competitive and have substantially more impact for the region and the state than either university could accomplish independently. This partnership also avoids costly duplication of efforts, effectively utilizing taxpayer dollars and moving forward without delay.

Here are key elements we have proposed, should our partnership with WSU remain in place. Many of these elements require a more detailed discussion on how they would be operationalized, and we remain very open to discussing with WSU and Community leadership at our next meeting. Also, please note that our Advisory Committee on Medical Access and Affordability, led by Governor Dan Evans, is actively at work, and that additional recommendations to further improve UW Medicine’s medical education program and strengthen our partnerships will also be forthcoming this Fall:

✓ Establish a new “mega brand” partnership between UW, WSU and other community and academic partners in the University District to raise the profile of each partner, leverage core institutional strengths, and capture fully the highest economic value for Spokane without unnecessary duplication of costs and efforts. The best example of an existing “mega brand” partnership is the Research Triangle Park – a powerful collaboration of nine universities in North Carolina that is an economic engine for the region. Similar to North Carolina’s enviable Research Triangle, each university would leverage its core and complementary strengths. We believe this is the strongest and best path to realize fully the Center’s projected $1.6 billion economic impact and ensure the region remains economically competitive over the long term.

✓ Rapidly expand the four-year medical education program in Spokane. In alignment with the Tripp Umbach report recommendations, the initial goal is to have a total medical student population of 320 (80 students per year) and to consider additional growth (to 120 students per year or beyond) as Washington’s healthcare workforce assets and demographics shift and change.

✓ Remodel and strengthen the current UW School of Medicine medical education model to provide an increased role for Washington State University in classroom teaching, curriculum development, faculty hiring, and admissions processes.
✓ Appoint a local leader (Dean, Chief Administrative Officer or similar title) to oversee local program development and decision-making.

✓ Appoint a Medical School Advisory Committee, comprised of university and community leadership, to support and guide the ongoing vision and expansion of the medical school, and provide ongoing, transparent accountability on progress and success.

✓ Dedicate Spokane-based research funds and associated indirect cost recovery funds locally to support the development of an active research base in Spokane.

✓ Develop a joint plan for residency (graduate medical education) expansion to drive new, permanent residency funding to eastern Washington and other rural and underserved areas through an innovative federal pilot program and through other collaborative graduate medical education efforts like the Teaching Health Center.

✓ Expand inter-institutional, interdisciplinary medical and health professions training programs, including the UW MEDEX physician assistant program located on the Riverpoint campus and the UW’s successful Regional Initiatives in Dental Education (RIDE) partnership with Eastern Washington University.

✓ Work collaboratively to increase the health workforce pipeline from K-12 to college across eastern Washington and other underserved areas in the state.

We believe this new, expanded collaborative model for university and medical education would implement the vision for Spokane’s Academic Health Science and Research Center as expeditiously and powerfully as possible, with the greatest positive impact for all of Spokane – not just for an individual institution. University of Washington leadership stands united on this approach and on our commitment to make this our top priority this upcoming legislative session.

However, it’s also important to understand that we believe this model can only be successful with full buy-in and commitment from each partner.

As you weigh the proposal for a separate, stand-alone medical school in Spokane, it is important to understand the realities it represents. The expensive, all-consuming process would take years to fully establish a new, separately accredited medical school and many more years beyond that to build the type of reputation our existing collaborative program has. We have conveyed to WSU that if they opt to proceed in this direction, its leaders’ passion and energy would need to be dedicated to their own enterprise—not to developing a new, expanded collaboration with the UW in addition to starting a new independent medical school. It is unrealistic—and frankly, a disservice to the Spokane community, current students and faculty—to claim they can effectively do both. It is also inconsistent with the collaborative vision for medical education that has made the UW’s community-based, medical education program so successful.

We continue to welcome the opportunity to address concerns and re-commit to a pathway of collaboration and mutual success. By continuing to work together, we are confident we can do what is best for Spokane, our students and the citizens of the state of Washington.
Please do not hesitate to contact us directly if you have any further comments or questions. Thank you for your continued support.

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