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Cancer funding plan likely would benefit Med Center

Perry signs the measure, but voters must OK the bond issue

By TODD ACKERMAN Copyright 2007 Houston Chronicle



ERIN TRIEB For the Chronicle

Gov. Rick Perry, at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, hands a pen to breast cancer survivor and lobbyist Andrea McWilliams to symbolize a bill that he signed funding cancer research.

In a move expected to give the Texas Medical Center a major boost, Gov. Rick Perry signed a bill Wednesday that will put on the November ballot a \$3 billion bond issue to fund research in the fight against cancer.

The initiative, modeled after a 2004 California measure in which voters approved \$3 billion for stem-cell research, seeks to compensate for the federal government's declining funding for scientific research in recent years.

"There is no piece of legislation that could mean more to the future of this state than this cancer-research bill," Perry said at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center.

"It will set our sights on cancer, much as we once set them on polio, then the most-feared thing. Today, cancer is that feared thing."

Perry was joined at the ceremony by Lance Armstrong, a cancer survivor and seven-time Tour de France winner, who called on Texans "to show up and vote in big numbers for the initiative, a message to the country and world that cancer is a priority." Armstrong was a leading spokesman for the bill in the recent legislative session.

Rep. Jim Keffer, R-Eastland, who sponsored the House version of the bill, added that people shouldn't think the election will be "a slam dunk."

The measure easily passed in the Senate and House, although some lawmakers argued that cancer research should be funded by state general revenue rather than debt. Perry said Wednesday that it will provide grant money to promising projects that often can't find funding.

Cancer in Texas

Texas is home to about 400,000 cancer survivors. An estimated 95,000 Texans will be diagnosed this year, and 35,000 will die of the disease. According to legislative advocates of the bill, cancer costs the state \$30 billion per year in direct and indirect costs.

If voters approve the constitutional amendment in November, it will allow the state to issue up to \$300 million a year in general obligation bonds over the next 10 years.

It also would create the Cancer Prevention and Research Institute of Texas, which would dole out grant money to Texas researchers.

Although the grant money will be awarded through a competitive peer-review process, officials at the ceremony said they expect no area to receive a bigger share than the Texas Medical Center, which is home to M.D. Anderson Cancer Center and Baylor College of Medicine, two of the state's three federally designated cancer centers. The third is at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio.

"With their infrastructure, experience and high-caliber researchers, those two Houston institutions figure to fare the best," said Cathy Bonner, a former Ann Richards administrator who suggested the initiative after escorting the late former governor to her doctor appointments for esophageal cancer last summer.

The notion was seconded by former state Comptroller John Sharp, who together with Bonner founded cancerkills.org, an organization dedicated to the legislation's passage. Sharp said he hatched the idea for the initiative while dove-hunting with M.D. Anderson President Dr. John Mendelsohn 10 years ago but then never got the chance to push it through because he lost his bid to become lieutenant governor to Perry.

Under the proposal, grantees must provide a 50 percent match to the funding they receive, although it does not have to be in cash.

Salaries, laboratory expenses and other costs can make up the match.

Panel would be named

A committee that would evaluate research submissions will be appointed if voters approve the November issue. Mendelsohn suggested presidents of the state's universities be solicited for candidates and added that they should include scientists from out of state.

The \$300 million would be in addition to the \$215 million that Texas currently receives from the National Cancer Institute annually (M.D. Anderson gets \$114 million of that).

The NCI's budget has remained unchanged in recent years, amounting to a gradual drop in inflation-adjusted funding.

If voters approve the amendment, the first \$300 million could be issued in September 2008.

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