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If WSU gets grant, 2,000 jobs possible

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The Wichita Eagle

Wichita is on the verge of landing a grant that researchers believe will create a new industry and eventually provide more than 2,000 high-paying research and manufacturing jobs.

The Kansas Bioscience Authority is expected to decide Tuesday whether to give Wichita State University a \$21.7 million grant.

The money would be used by the National Institute for Aviation Research at WSU and Via Christi Research to invent artificial hips and other medical devices from composite material -- the same lightweight, flexible material used to make airplanes.

Those devices could eventually be made in the Wichita area.

On Friday, the authority's investment committee recommended approving the grant proposal, which was the result of three years' work by Wichita scientists.

The full board will meet Tuesday in Atlanta, where members are attending the 2009 Bio International Convention. The biosciences authority was created by the Kansas Legislature in 2004 to encourage and fund new high-tech industries.

Setting milestones

Wichita's proposal team -- including John Tomblin, executive director of the National Institute for Aviation Research, and David McDonald, associate WSU provost -- conceived the idea of using composites for medical devices more than three years ago.

They immediately joined with Via Christi health scientists, including surgeon David McQueen. Via Christi then hired Paul Wooley, a researcher.

Partners plan to develop a number of devices ranging from battlefield splints to hospital gurneys to hip replacements, all made from composite materials that are regularly tested and developed at NIAR.

Wooley said Friday the KBA officials praised the Wichita proposal after months of asking rigorous questions.

Wooley said the investment committee is recommending giving the Wichita project about \$4 million a year over five years. The seed money will be used to buy equipment and hire engineers and researchers.

"They are setting a bunch of milestones for us to reach in the first year," Wooley said.

Plenty of good jobs

Partners say the project is a good fit for Wichita, which already has engineers and workers who are skilled in developing and manufacturing composite materials.

A composite material is fiber, laid down in a matrix, and then embedded in a plastic or other resin. It's incredibly lightweight but strong and can be as spongy or flexible as needed.

Partners predict they will create at least 2,600 jobs in the first decade.

"And these would be good-paying jobs," said Michael Good, director of business operations at Via Christi Research.

As many as 25 local composites manufacturing companies have expressed strong interest in the project, he said.

The industry could provide some needed stability to Wichita's economy, he said.

"Aircraft manufacturing is great for Wichita, but there is an ingrained fluctuation in local economics caused by those downturns," Good said. "On a chart, the manufacturing line for aviation goes up and down like a roller

coaster ride, almost every three to seven years, but the line on manufacturing medical devices goes straight up."

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