

# The Day



## Investing in UConn Health Center benefits state

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The fate of the John Dempsey Hospital in Farmington and the University of Connecticut Health Center it serves may appear an issue remote from daily affairs in southeastern Connecticut. It's not.

About 35 percent of the physicians who graduate from the UConn School of Medicine end up practicing in the state, as do 60 percent of those who go through the School of Dental Medicine. But unless the state approves a plan to replace the old, worn-out Dempsey hospital, the academic standing of the medical and dental schools will suffer. That in turn will diminish the number and quality of faculty and students attracted by the university, raising the potential for physician and dentist shortages in the state.

As important is the reality that the outdated hospital is preventing the University of Connecticut Health Center and medical school from achieving their full potential. The Dempsey facility is the second smallest academic hospital in the nation. UConn cannot sail forward into the bright future of medical marvels when strapped to that anchor.

Health care and medical research remain growing industries, even during the current recession. Stem cell research, biotechnology, biomedical engineering and nanotechnology hold out great potential not only for producing a healthier society, but driving economic growth. If UConn can position itself to become a major player in attracting research grants, conducting drug trials and introducing cutting-edge technology in these fields, the financial spin-off would be enormous.

Fortunately, there is a good plan in place that can produce a top-tier, 1,100-bed teaching and research medical institution for UConn, transforming it into one of the country's largest academic hospitals and attracting millions of more dollars in research grants with the potential for creating hundreds of high-paying jobs.

Unfortunately, it will require significant taxpayer investment in a time of fiscal frugality. Yet it is an investment worth making because, ultimately, it will more than pay for itself in economic growth and new tax revenues.

The plan calls for a partnership marrying the UConn Health Center with Hartford Hospital. The selection of Hartford Hospital as a potential partner grew from a well-

designed process that invited medical institutions throughout the region to propose joint ventures with the health center. UConn pursued this path after an earlier proposal to build a new, larger Dempsey generated opposition from other hospitals that feared it would drain away patients.

The plan would create a "University Hospital" with two campuses, a new John Dempsey and a renovated Hartford Hospital. The new Dempsey Hospital would cost about \$475 million, raised by state bonding. Hartford Hospital in turn will commit \$425 million to \$565 million for academic support, technology, research and new construction over the next 10 years.

Hartford Hospital considers the investment in the partnership as a means of securing its future as a major research and teaching hospital.

The state would handle the tricky problem of higher-cost fringe benefits paid to state health center employees than their Hartford counterparts by subsidizing those higher costs. University Hospital revenues would cover all other personnel expenses. We urge the state to make every effort over time to bring those higher fringe benefits in line with private-sector benefits.

In fiscal years 2010 and 2011 the state would contribute \$27 million to the new partnership for the fringe-benefit expenses. Capital costs for design and planning the new Dempsey hospital would be \$28 million.

Doing nothing just wastes more money, because without a deal in place the state would still have to spend \$38 million over the next two years to subsidize Dempsey hospital, which operates at a deficit.

The Day urges the legislature to adopt and financially support the UConn Health Center and Hartford Hospital plan.