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Bill makes Valley medical school a reality

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May 26, 2009 - 9:08 PM

By ALLEN ESSEX, Valley Morning Star

HARLINGEN - Senate Bill 98 has passed both houses of the Texas Legislature paving the way for expansion of the Regional Academic Health Center into a full-fledged medical school here.

Mayor Chris Boswell made the announcement Tuesday when he told the Development Corporation of Harlingen Inc.'s board that the bill to expand the RAHC into a medical school in Cameron County awaits the governor's signature.

"It passed both houses with a two-thirds vote," Boswell said, adding his praise for [state](#) Sen. Eddie Lucio Jr., D-Brownsville, and state Rep. Eddie Lucio III, D-San Benito.

Paul Cowen, chief of staff for Lucio Jr., the bill's author, said that about \$27 million in general revenue funding has been secured for the project.

The bill was sent to Gov. Rick Perry on Friday and he has 10 days to sign the it, Cowen said, adding that the governor may affix his signature to the bill sooner.

"He'll probably sign it and then come to the Rio Grande Valley to do a formal signing," Cowen said. "We're working on that."

Passage of the bill doesn't mean a medical school will be built immediately, the mayor said.

"It means that, when the University of Texas Board of Regents actually creates the Health Science Center, which would include a medical school and other possible schools, it would be eligible for (Permanent University Fund) funding," Boswell said.

"It will not authorize funding to actually create the Health Science Center until 2015, but that's still on the accelerated track," the mayor said. "This is very similar to the model that Sen. Lucio used to create the RAHC to begin with, 10 years ago, so all of this is good [news](#)."

The mayor said passage of the bill may have a huge impact on the city.

"We also had help from Mayor Richard Cortez, of McAllen, who sent a letter of support for this and testified before the (Texas) Senate, Rep. Aaron Peña, Rep. Armando Martinez of Weslaco ... they all supported it."

Boswell said expansion of the RAHC may come much sooner.

"There is still money in the (state) budget for the next item for the RAHC," he said. "It's a special item, we probably won't know until (today). We're down to the one-yard line ... hopefully there will still be money. There's just a lot of fighting (in the Legislature) for every single dollar. We're almost there. That's worked out very well."

Texas State Technical College-Harlingen will also receive more state funding, the mayor said.

"TSTC associate degree funding legislation, sponsored by Rep. Tara Rios Ybarra ... has passed," Boswell said. "It's still got to go through a couple more steps before it goes over to the governor."

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larger area, actually about an eight or nine-county South Texas area, that's the service area for this Health Science Center."

Harlingen officials will need to start planning in earnest to expand the RAHC and Health Science Center, the mayor said.

Elizalde said the first expansion will likely be the second and third floor of the RAHC.

The long-term prospects are much larger, Boswell said.

"If you were to envision a Health Science Center, you have to look at what was at San Antonio 35 years ago, when there were just two silos out there," the mayor said. "Now they have basically built up almost 300 acres of facilities. Just use your imagination. They've got a medical school, a dental school, a nursing school ... a four-year medical school would probably need another building of some kind and whatever goes with it."

Cowen said [education](#) programs at RAHC are currently being re-tooled to fit UT guidelines.

"The next step is for us to work very closely with the board of regents, with the health science center in San Antonio so we start building the faculty - the infrastructure so to speak," He said.

In addition to Cameron and Hidalgo counties, the bill also allows for the new school facilities in Bee, Brooks, Jim Hogg, Jim Wells, Kenedy, Kleberg, Nueces, Starr, Willacy and Zapata counties.

"It will be a tremendous impact, bigger than anything you've ever seen," Cowen said. "You can have your child go through high school, through college and then right into this thing, right in the same place and never leave town."

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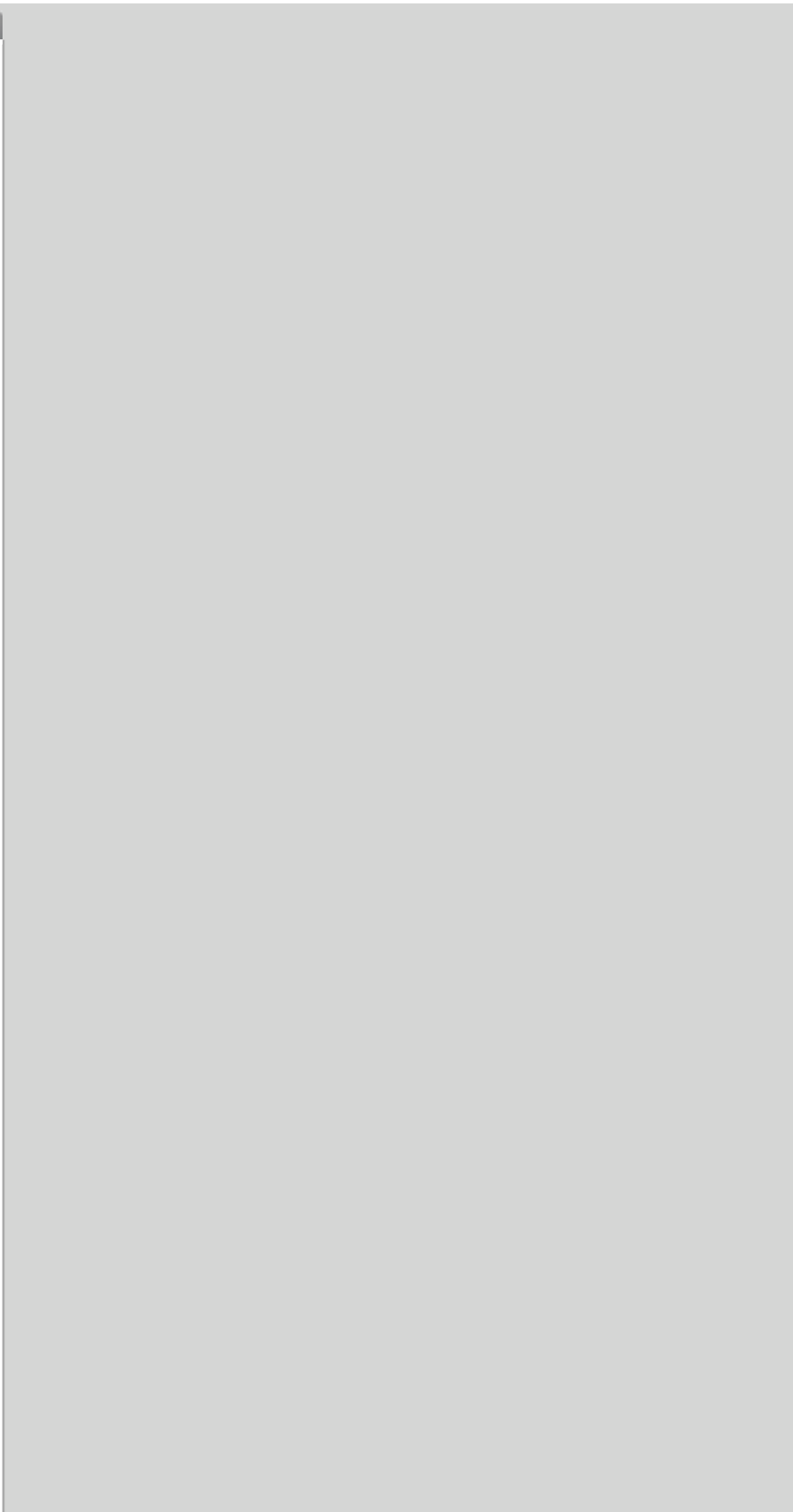
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