

Bond proposal key to future of UAF's life sciences building

by Jeff Richardson / jrichardson@newsminer.com

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FAIRBANKS — When Cynthia Henry sat down at her first meeting with the University of Alaska Board of Regents nearly eight years ago, she remembers a briefing about a badly needed science building that officials wanted to construct on Fairbanks' upper campus.

[view image](#)

The name of that facility has changed through the years — it was first identified with the acronyms BiCS, then BIOS, then its current label, the Life Sciences Classroom and Laboratory Facility. But through years of lobbying and maneuvering, the \$108.6 million building has remained the conspicuous missing piece on the University of Alaska Fairbanks' West Ridge.

"It feels really overdue," said Henry, who leads the UA Board of Regents today. "Sometimes an idea floats in and it goes away. I think it enhances its merit that this building keeps coming back, year after year."

The latest opportunity happens in November, when voters will consider whether to pass a diverse \$397 million state bond package of education-related projects, with \$88 million for Life Sciences as the centerpiece.

UAF officials say the need is as large as ever for the building, which would add new classroom and office space, along with a cutting-edge research facility that the campus lacks.

Supporters of the project say it's different than a typical campus construction project and is needed for both modern science instruction and to serve as an economic development engine for Alaska.

With most of its biology and chemistry facilities dating to the 1960s, supporters say it's time for an update if UAF wants to be on the same level with the nation's best science universities.

Brian Barnes, director of the Institute of Arctic Biology, said the building will enable UAF to compete for a variety of lucrative grants in the health and biology fields.

UAF was No. 99 on the list of institutions receiving federal research dollars in 2009, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education. Barnes said that amounts to about \$100 million in research expenditures.

"It's a big deal, and it does create jobs," Barnes said.

Making do with aging facilities

During a tour of some of the West Ridge science facilities, associate biology professor Christa Mulder highlighted the need for a fresh facility.

In some cases, the problems translate into cramped classrooms or awkward seating arrangements. In others, she said they result in difficult, or even impossible, working conditions.

Items stored in the rusty cabinets in parts of the Arctic Health Research Building are routinely placed in biohazard bags so they can remain clean. The vents in the lab are covered with air

filters and dissection pads, so watery debris won't leak out over the ongoing experiments. Renovations to most of the older labs are complicated by the asbestos-filled countertops.

Kim Iceman, a biology graduate student, thinks the poor ventilation in her lab room is at least partly to blame for her asthma. She brings an inhaler whenever she conducts an experiment to counter the inevitable attack.

"This is a hard place to work," she said simply, while examining the brain of a mouse as part of an experiment on Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

Mulder said introductory science classes, which typically have big enrollments, must be held in Schaible Auditorium. That option requires a trek to the other side of campus, far away from most science faculty and graduate students on West Ridge.

Other science classes are held on upper campus — the West Ridge Research Building, the Arctic Health Building, Irving Building and a set of trailers that have served as "temporary" overflow space for the past seven years.

Cellular and molecular biology are required for students, but Mulder said courses are limited by the 1960s-era facilities. Classes that require a sterile environment, such as experiments on disease-causing bacteria, are generally unavailable.

She also said the far-flung classes don't really fit with the modern approach to science and research.

"The way we do research has changed — it's become much more collaborative than it used to be," Mulder said. "Science now is almost never one person, one project."

Barnes and Mulder also say that the facilities make it tough to attract top faculty and undergraduates to UAF.

"We have exciting science and research that's being done," Barnes said. "But they see an ATCO (trailer) and an old crummy lab and they decide to go elsewhere."

Voters get the final say in November

The bond package that includes Life Sciences has had no organized opposition so far, and the facility itself has had almost overwhelming support. The regents listed it as the only project on their capital wish-list to the Legislature, and it also received the endorsement of a variety of business groups, including the Alaska State Chamber of Commerce.

Life Sciences seemed to have a clear path to legislative funding this year. The facility was the Board of Regents' only capital request this year, and got the backing of Gov. Sean Parnell and most legislators. But at the end of the session Life Sciences was packaged with a handful of other projects — including a \$60 million Anchorage athletic facility, new public schools in southwest Alaska, and a biological research facility on Kodiak Island — into a bond package for voters to consider.

Both the House and Senate voted unanimously to forward the \$397 million bond proposal to voters.

Considering the feeble economic climate, that move was disappointing to supporters. It's a tough time to convince voters to commit the state to spending large amounts of money, Henry acknowledges.

"It's a time when people are worried about their own debt and government debt," she said.

The University of Alaska Foundation, which uses private donations to support UA, has contributed \$450,000 to back the "Yes of Prop B" campaign. UA Foundation President Mary Rutherford said the campaign is being funded with investment income from donors, and didn't steer any money away from scholarships or other purposes.

"We're supporting it because these projects are so important to the university and because the administration asked us for help," Rutherford said.

If that campaign doesn't convince voters to support Life Sciences on Nov. 2, Henry said it will create a familiar scenario. Regents will probably try again next year, as they have each year for the past decade.

"The need doesn't go away," Barnes said. "It just keeps backing us up."

Contact staff writer Jeff Richardson at 459-7518.

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« [TaniaC](#) wrote on Saturday, Oct 09 at 10:29 PM »

The Butrovich Building is only occasionally used for formal teaching purposes, I am hard pressed to think of another building on West Ridge that is not used for teaching in one form or another. The science that goes on in the labs is a form of hands-on education, encouraging critical thinking and requiring a rigorous curiosity. So, none of these buildings are extra-curricular. They are crucial to the curriculum, and those teaching it, being as current as possible. I believe I've had classes, for credit, in almost every building that was on the West Ridge prior to 1995.

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« [TeaPartyPatriot](#) wrote on Saturday, Oct 09 at 07:35 PM »

I drove by the UAF today on the Parks Hwy. I looked up there and saw the beautiful Geophysical Institute, the Butrovich Building where offices and the super computer are, and the new UAF Museum. It was a staggering site. Then it dawned on me. None of these buildings are class rooms. Yet I see the NM has pictures of ATCO buildings being used as such. Do we see something wrong here? Yes we do. The UAF spends millions on these extra curricular buildings but ignores its primary function, teaching students. Somehow the pictures of the ATCO units and another sob story on how hard up the UAF is, simply doesn't cut it. Grow up, UAF!

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« [Txak](#) wrote on Saturday, Oct 09 at 05:24 PM »

I believe that the UAF needs the Life Sciences building. Nonetheless, three things would need to change before I would be willing to vote yes on this bond measure: first, take the 60 million dollar athletic facility for UAA OUT of the proposal. An athletic facility is not about education and is not needed in this economic climate. Two, cut the incredible waste in administration by getting rid of redundant, high-paid, high-level administrators. Third, the Biology & Wildlife Department needs to start caring about the education of undergraduates. Most of the faculty in that department don't care about undergraduates - their entire focus is on bringing in research monies. Yes, bringing in research funding is important, but not at the expense of hiring excellent teachers for our students. There needs to be a BALANCE! I, therefore, will vote NO on the bond measure.

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« [1AhHa](#) wrote on Saturday, Oct 09 at 05:02 PM »

For 397 million plus debt service I want more for my money.

This is a political decision.

This 397 million plus the 800 million some Obama bucks would have made dent in the dam project's cost.

To date we have little to show.

---- As for 99th or 15th the drop rate is the same 72% for UAF and 75% for UAA.

One other point:

Education is not edible nor does it heat the house.

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« **Kuparuk** wrote on Saturday, Oct 09 at 04:04 PM »

I agree... the Susitna Dam should be built. In the early 80s, UA research showed it was not economically viable at the then cost of energy, but it would be a wise investment if energy costs increased. The decision to build or not build was political then and political now, but it does not come down to a choice between building a new research facility and building a new dam. They both must stand on their own merits.

Saidso was correct when he/she said "UAF was No. 99 on the list of institutions receiving federal research dollars in 2009" and that is incredible for this school when one considers the tens of thousands of high powered research institutions in this country. If you remove universities with medical schools (which we do not have), UAF moves up to number 16, which is astounding. This university is a powerhouse of research and it helps to advance our state and our nation.

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« **SaidSo** wrote on Saturday, Oct 09 at 03:16 PM »

1TarBaby.

The thought police are looking up the word expurgate.

Good one!

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« **1TarBaby** wrote on Saturday, Oct 09 at 03:04 PM »

~~~~~

*Since, 72% of UAF students drop out, flunk out, or are kicked out --- the very first thing they must learn in college is to count change.*

*After asking:*

*(do you want fries with that?)*

*----*

*If the ballot proposition passes, the state will be stuck funding this budget draining Tar Baby for ever.*

*However, if the U just increased the academic standards high enough to cut admissions in half; there would be plenty of available space using the empty dorm rooms.*

*I can only imagine all the extra parking places and the parking brown shirts gainfully employed making change.*

*Brrer Rabbit wants affordable electricity for just 1 light bulb.*

*As for me, my tar chips and cracks at -40. I want to plug in my electric blanket and reduce my consumption of coal generated electricity - to save Alaska and the entire planet from global warming CO2!*

*I care about the planet! I care about prior generations of Tar Babies who work for the U, state, city, and borough.*

*I don't want dot want my grand children to suffer another winter with cracks and broken bodies while breathing those dread full 2.5s from wood stoves and the UAF power plant. The only way to save them is to build Susitna Dam to provide affordable low cost electricity.*

*I worry the polar bears might drown and some of the 10 million unemployed Americans who have been pulling the wagon will NOT have good high paying union jobs building Susitna Dam.*

*To all of you YES Voters! Show compassion and social justice for the struggling over taxed unemployed proletariat.*

*Help us! Now Vote no!*

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« [northpolesanta](#) wrote on Saturday, Oct 09 at 02:05 PM »

*remember vote no!*

*and, teach your kids the following:*

□□□□□□□□

*(do you want fries with that?)*

*will come in handy with the chines tourists....*

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« [northpolesanta](#) wrote on Saturday, Oct 09 at 12:48 PM »

*i urge everyone to vote no for this bond. remember, the chinese are not investing in their educational system at record levels, that the chinese are not investing in future scientists and engineers, that the chinese given current trends will not pass us as the #1 economy, and, remember the chinese are a peaceful, democractic, jeffersonian democracy that isn't determined to become a world military super power.*

*so.....since there is nothing to worry about with regard to the chinese, there is no reason to spend one dime more on education in the united states.*

*and....since neither the current governor, nor the ex-halfterm governor, ms. CUT AND RUN, can see china from their house, well, obviously there is nothing to worry about.*

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« **chillyyagain** wrote on Saturday, Oct 09 at 12:47 PM »

*How about taking some of the money in that overweight Statewide administrative building and sending it to the SCHOOLS where it belongs? I've not seen so many vice-presidents of this and that ever, anywhere! Let's pay to educate the students, not create a hierarchy of state management. What are they there for anyway? The University is cutting back, but look where the cuts are. It's sure not in the bloated management!*

*I'm not voting for another bond (sorry students) until there's a big house cleaning up on the hill!*

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« **JaniceFbx** wrote on Saturday, Oct 09 at 12:38 PM »

*We need the Life Sciences building and new lab facilities. Opportunities for medical and veterinary students here are slim to nil; most of them will opt to go out of state for their education. After that, there is not much to attract graduates back to AK. Meanwhile, the circle continues as the population can't get access to great medical care, and go to Canada or Seattle for treatment. Try getting a quick appointment with a doctor in this town while you are sick; most have a two-week wait -- or they will tell you to go to the ER. UAF wants to start these programs, but we need to help them get it off the ground. We have a serious lack of medical personnel in this state.*

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« **out\_in\_the\_cold** wrote on Saturday, Oct 09 at 12:23 PM »

*Kuparuk .. right on target. Alaska's education system must excel in a competitive world.*

*The Life Science building at UAF is a prime example of what should have already been constructed and preparing for our future.*

*To bad voters don't have a line-item veto in this ballot issue .. or the dribble dip in Anchorage would get a "NO" vote on my curtain time.*

*Vote "YES" on the education bond issue!*

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« **Kuparuk** wrote on Saturday, Oct 09 at 11:05 AM »

*\$100M in research dollars is really good for a university that is this small. That money has led to discoveries and new techniques that have helped our oil, fishing, mining and tourism industries. With those funds, they have learned to build better houses for cold climates, construct stable roads over permafrost, and improve the health of rural and urban citizens of Alaska. But, that money has also employed local people, purchased local supplies, and contributed much to powering the local economy. It is a very competitive world for research funding, and the only reason research money continues to come to UAF is because it has been proven, under rigorous review, to be worth the investment.*

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« **Dove** wrote on Saturday, Oct 09 at 09:48 AM »

*Only \$347 Million? Well, gee, why not? Apparently UAF is immune to the federal dollars crunch. It's "hard" to study under these conditions? Just wait, it's going to get a lot harder.*

*Fund the dam.*

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« **fishtales** wrote on Saturday, Oct 09 at 08:43 AM »

Count me in with the dam.

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« **mcgillagorilla** wrote on Saturday, Oct 09 at 06:47 AM »

yes we have so much money we do not build typical square or rectangular buildings but build all kinds of weird shapes that the architects come up with. put the money in the susutina dam and tell the university to find a rich sugar daddy as it is not the local voters. a round wall costs at least three times as much as a streight wall in case you missed what i am trying to say.

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« **sosorry** wrote on Saturday, Oct 09 at 06:15 AM »

It has been interesting watching how Republican interests handle this project. Lots of smiles and oh

yeah's but the thought balloon is more like," whoa we ain't paying for something that will probably come up with some scientific mumbo jumbo that makes us stop doing something we want to do."

Investing in the future is important. Hiding from knowledge does not pay off. Better to have it coming from here than from other places.

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« **SaidSo** wrote on Saturday, Oct 09 at 01:54 AM »

UAF was No. 99 on the list of institutions receiving federal research dollars in 2009, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education. Barnes said that amounts to about \$100 million in research expenditures.

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Only a 100 million dollars!

There is a good reason why UAF is 99 th.

72% of students never get a degree.

<http://www.whatwilltheylearn.com/schools/compare/results.html>

We are borrowing money to make high priced temporary union construction jobs.

The 397 million borrowed dollars should be spent on building Susitna Dam which will reduce the cost of living and promote solid economic development for the majority of us numbering about 400,000.

Which is more impotent a fancy new building for drop-out U or reducing the cost of living?

DNM conspicuously did not mention what other projects are included in the bond package and the total cost principle plus debt service and at what percent.

An example of propaganda by omission.

Why vote to borrow money for hog sloping? When it will have zero effect on the 72% drop out rage.

<http://www.whatwilltheylearn.com/schools/compare/results.html>

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