University of Alaska budget tops $849 million

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FAIRBANKS — The University of Alaska Board of Regents is hoping the third time is a charm for the project formerly known as BIOS.

The board met Friday at the University of Alaska Fairbanks to approve the UA system’s 2010 fiscal year operating and capital budget. The 2010 operating budget request totaled nearly $850 million while the capital request totaled almost $541 million.

BIOS, renamed Life Sciences Innovation and Learning, was the second priority on the capital budget after annual facility renewals and renovations, the consistent top priority for UA. Life Sciences is a biological facilities to be based at UAF.
Mary Hughes, chairwoman of the board, said the materials UAF Chancellor Brian Rogers provided about Life Sciences and the public testimony from students and outside interests such as community members and employers shows a need for the facility in Alaska. The regents heard more than two hours of public testimony at the meeting.

Hughes also said Life Sciences will give UA the resources to compete on the national level in research. For every dollar spent on research, UA gets more than $6 back in the form of funding and grants.

Changes to the original BIOS plan include separate teaching and research space, reducing the size of the building and using bonds to fund part of the program to reduce the price tag. The original plan’s joint research and teaching space would allow more undergraduates to help with research and be overall more convenient for students and instructors. Rogers said separating teaching and instruction was a hard concession to make but a beneficial one. Work can begin on whichever building gets funded first.

“We can start to fill the need more rapidly,” he said.

The original project was projected to cost $113 million, but this year, it will require $82 million from the state general fund.

Rogers said he was excited by the consistent support of the board for Life Sciences. The next step for Life Sciences is to go out in the community to explain what the project is, its scientific benefits and the benefits to the community, he said.
Campus entry and road improvements at the University of Alaska Southeast, a sports arena at the University of Alaska Anchorage, new facilities planning funds, reducing maintenance and renewal and repair backlog round out the capital needs request.

The UA operating systems request is a 9.4 percent increase over the 2009 fiscal year budget. State funds would cover $345 million while the university will generate $504 million from grants, tuition and other sources.

The top priority for the budget was to strengthen K-12 outreach. The budget proposal has $2.6 million dedicated to programs including career awareness, summer programs and teacher preparation.

Other priorities include energy, engineering and climate funding, health program funding and workforce programs.

Hughes said the approved budget was a great one that will really assist the state. The public testimony of employers at the meeting demonstrated a need in Alaska for employees in many fields, she said. The K-12 outreach and workforce training will help train and prepare Alaskan students for a wide variety of careers ranging from vocational skills to scientific research.

“The university is there, it’s one-stop shopping,” Hughes said.