

Scripps Research Institute to Florida?

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) Florida's Legislature returned to the Capitol on Monday to consider a \$310 million spending package that would pay for a California biotechnology institute's expansion to Florida.

La Jolla, Calif.-based Scripps Research Institute is planning to build a research campus in Palm Beach County if the state pays the startup costs. Lawmakers will also consider creating a special fund that could be tapped to lure other businesses to the state.

Gov. Jeb Bush has worked for months on luring Scripps, and touted the deal as an economy-changer for Florida on par with the invention of air conditioning or the arrival of Disney.

On Monday, in a speech to a joint session of the Legislature, Bush said Scripps' impact could be similar to what NASA and the space industry brought to Florida.

"Forty years ago, Florida had a once in a lifetime opportunity to be on the leading edge of technology that would revolutionize the world," Bush said. "Today, the Scripps Florida project gives this generation of Floridians that same opportunity to leap to the forefront of emerging technology and scientific discovery."

Bush and other supporters say Scripps will not only bring high-tech jobs but will generate a "clustering" effect, with biotech spinoffs and other companies flocking to be near an institute that is an acknowledged medical research leader.

Bush says Scripps' expansion eventually would create 6,500 jobs and pump billions into the economy.

The institute is known for groundbreaking work in leukemia, ovarian cancer, Lou Gehrig's disease, Alzheimer's disease and AIDS. It has become internationally recognized for research into immunology, biology, chemistry, neuroscience, autoimmune and cardiovascular diseases and synthetic vaccine development.

The \$310 million would be paid to Scripps over seven years to equip and staff the facility. The money would come from a one-time economic stimulus package from the federal government.

Palm Beach County will spend \$200 million to build the Scripps campus.

Lawmakers had several questions, including whether Scripps could guarantee it would create a certain number of jobs, provide a return on the state's investment and that it would remain in Florida.

Democrats also said they were concerned estimated benefits are overblown and that the state might do just as well by boosting investments in state universities.

Even some of Bush's fellow Republicans expressed concerns about what level of oversight the Legislature would have over the institute while acknowledging that there was a

fine line between oversight and micromanagement that could hamper its ability to do useful research.

Sen. Tom Lee, R-Brandon, said lawmakers wanted in on negotiations with Scripps over accountability measures, and that the current oversight plan proposed by the governor wasn't strong enough.

"It is the Legislature writing this check," said Lee. "The governor's proposal lacks some of the controls."

The governor also wants approval for a \$190 million special fund that could be used to close "rainmaker" deals with other companies considering relocating to Florida.

The so-called "megafund" is being pushed by state economic development officials who say they do fine closing small and medium-size deals, but need to have quick access to a large pot of money for projects with short timelines.

"To close these deals, timing is critical," said Darrell Kelley, chief executive of Enterprise Florida, the state's economic development organization.

Lawmakers were hearing details of the planned deal, asking questions of company officials and the governor and discussing the proposal in committees. A vote is not planned until later this week.

It's the fifth special session this year. Bush called one session to settle a state budget dispute and three more to change the laws governing lawsuits in medical malpractice cases.