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Gov. Phil Bredesen confirmed Thursday his support for East Tennessee State University's proposal to start a freestanding pharmacy school without state funding, calling the plan "as good as it is unprecedented."



Gov. Phil Bredesen holds a piggy bank given to him Thursday by ETSU President Paul Stanton, left, for donations for the new pharmacy school. (Lee Talbert / Johnson City Press)

"This is a very impressive effort on the part of the local community, and in the end, I really want to reward that kind of thing," Bredesen said following his announcement at ETSU's James H. Quillen College of Medicine. "I really believe that the money is there to do the school with."

Announcing his support to more than 150 luncheon guests at the medical school's Stanton-Gerber Hall, Bredesen called on advocates of the proposal to "roll up our sleeves together" to raise the private funding necessary to make the school a reality.

He said ETSU would have to garner \$5 million in start-up funds within 12 weeks to present to the Tennessee Board of Regents and the Tennessee Higher Education Commission at the approval process, as well as have another \$2.5 million in the bank by the time the school opens in fall 2006. ETSU officials have said they need \$16 million in all for the school's operations and to renovate a Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Mountain Home, facility neighboring Stanton-Gerber Hall.

Since the governor's weight all but guaranteed success, ETSU President Paul Stanton found himself on "cloud nine" Thursday, although relief had been building since Bredesen visited him for details March 4 and pledged to make a decision within two weeks.

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“So, I’ve been feeling a little better because of what he said, but until I heard it there (during the announcement), I had not heard it,” Stanton said. “I had not read his script. I didn’t know if there would be surprises or not, but it was right on point.”

THEC Chairman Jim Powell, a Limestone resident and Johnson City businessman, said he expected the Regents to consider ETSU’s proposal in June before it reaches THEC in July.

“You can do certain things, but you’ve also got to raise the money to meet all those criteria,” Powell said. “If the community raises the money like they have been supportive of the program, then we can meet that schedule.

“If we don’t raise the money or get good, hard, solid commitments, it has to stop until those commitments are made,” he said.

Stanton said the advocates at Thursday’s luncheon — some of whom left checks — were just a sample of the regional support for a pharmacy school, so he expected to have the necessary cash and pledges in hand by the deadline.

“This is going to get done,” Stanton said. “There’s no question about it.”

Bredesen planned to guide the proposal through the approval process.

“I’m on board,” he said. “I’m making this a project of mine to get it through both the Board of Regents, which I do not think is an issue, and THEC, which could be a little more of an issue, because they tried very hard to put something together between the University of Tennessee and ETSU. I think they got close but no cigar.”

The governor chose ETSU’s freestanding program over a THEC consultant’s recommendation for a collaborative program with UT’s Memphis-based pharmacy program. He said the institutions tried to make the collaborative happen, but it never quite worked for either school.

What was the deciding factor? ETSU’s plan was both reasonable and sensible, he said.

“Believe me I’ve seen a lot of them that weren’t — that were just very speculative and they really hadn’t done their homework,” Bredesen said. “(ETSU officials have) done their homework, and then the community support was really terrific.”

He also had convinced UT President John Petersen to reverse his opposition to ETSU’s plan. The governor said UT officials had been concerned about stretching state resources too thin, but once ETSU’s fund-raising plan was clear, Petersen was comfortable with the decision.

“In the end, he told me he was actually more comfortable with this approach than some sort of shared thing,” Bredesen said.

In a written statement, the UT president confirmed his support.

“I think the route that the governor is taking is a realistic and workable compromise, and we are very supportive of his efforts,” Petersen said. “We will continue with our planned expansion of the pharmacy school at the Health Science Center in Memphis, training 200 students a year by 2006 without any additional funds from the state, and we appreciate Gov. Bredesen’s support of that project.”

Bredesen said Tennessee had room for two pharmacy schools, and his support for ETSU’s program in no way diminished UT’s program. He supported the expansion effort.

“It is a very fine school, a nationally ranked school, and we’re going to use every opportunity to support it, including helping it to grow,” Bredesen said.

The governor said UT’s plan to have students spend their first year of studies in the collaborative program in Memphis before coming to a UT satellite program at ETSU was a serious issue.

“I’m acutely aware, as both governor and as campaigner for governor, of just how long this state really is,” he said.

Pointing to the success of ETSU’s rural medical programs, Bredesen expected the pharmacy school’s presence here to draw more Northeast Tennessee students into pharmacy education and remain in practice in the region. Because the state has been importing some 300 pharmacists per year, he also said the school should open up opportunities for Tennessee residents.

“Something that is very close to my heart but not all that easy to accomplish is ‘How do you get more and more Tennesseans to have the kind of advanced education that gives you the security and the income that a lot of young people deserve?’ ” the governor said.

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