Support MSU’s isotope research

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Michigan’s future economic security will be determined by our willingness to invest in science and technology.

Today more than ever, it is nations and peoples who are willing to push forward with an entrepreneurial spirit to the frontiers of research, and then commercialize that research, that are prosperous.

Michigan has long been a leader in science and technology development. And now we have earned an opportunity to show that our state is still the right place to build massive tools for new discovery, with the selection of Michigan State University as the site for the more than half-billion-dollar Facility for Rare Isotope Beams.

FRIB is a game-changer for our state.

The U.S. Department of Energy's decision in the waning days of President George Bush's administration gave Michigan the chance to develop and build this facility to find and study new rare isotopes. These isotopes have uses in national security, medicine, materials science and more.

The selection was the result of decades of nuclear science excellence at MSU and the National Superconducting Cyclotron Laboratory (NSCL), which is on campus.

According to a study by the Anderson Economic Group, FRIB will bring more than $1 billion in economic activity to our state over the next 20 years. More than 850 researchers from around the globe have already joined the FRIB Users Organization, offering their input into its development. Many have already visited mid-Michigan to participate in planning sessions and begin planning research projects that won’t start until FRIB is completed in 2020.

NSCL and FRIB are attracting to Michigan leading minds in isotope research, who will be teaching eager students. The combination has made MSU the leading nuclear physics graduate program in the nation, according to U.S. News and World Report, besting MIT in 2010. FRIB will be providing basic research, the kind that is rarely undertaken today by businesses — but which is vital for businesses to succeed. Basic research is, by its nature, risky, speculative, and often of greater benefit to society than to any one corporate sponsor. Without the discoveries made by basic research, business quickly runs out of new solutions and innovations for new products. Without innovation, economies wither. The nations that find tomorrow's great idea will be the leaders in developing that idea, spreading wealth throughout their peoples. The nations that decline to invest in basic research get to rent its results, paying terms set by the leader.

But for FRIB’s benefits to provide Michigan and our nation with significant global competitive advantage, it is important for Congress to continue funding commitments that have been made. A balanced federal budget is important. But so is scientific research, for our nation’s economic future.

Michigan’s strong and engaged congressional delegation has members in important seats in the House and Senate. They worked together to ensure that MSU and Michigan had a fair opportunity to win FRIB, and they have helped secure initial federal funding. That must continue as the project moves through development and, starting in 2012, construction.
Sandra Pierce is president and CEO of Charter One Bank, Michigan and Keith Cooley, former director of the state Department of Labor and Economic Growth, heads Principia LLC, a management consulting firm. Both are members of an MSU advisory committee on FRIB development.