Research facility needs support to serve as economic boost for state

By L. Brooks Patterson and James Blanchard, Special to The Oakland Press

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In East Lansing, construction continues on a three-quarter billion-dollar research facility that will position Michigan as a major leader in new technologies.

The Facility for Rare Isotope Beams will house the world’s most powerful rare isotope beam, giving researchers a chance to better understand our universe and examine more than 1,000 new rare isotopes, with some likely to have properties that can be turned into new inventions and for new uses – creating businesses and jobs.

But for FRIB to move forward, it needs continued support from our members of Congress. It’s a $730 million project, with about $100 million coming from the state of Michigan – and the rest an investment by the federal government in the kind of basic research private companies cannot do themselves, but need to use as the key ingredient for pioneering commercial breakthroughs.

Why should we care in Oakland County? Because the impact of the FRIB will serve as an economic boost for the entire state, including right here at home. The general contractor for the project, Barton Malow, is located in Oakland County. And the kinds of spinoff commercialization opportunities that could come from FRIB research align well with the expanded entrepreneurial activities of Automation Alley and our Medical Main Street projects.

For Michigan, FRIB is a giant talent magnet, already attracting some of the brightest minds internationally to our state to develop this facility. More than 800 researchers from around the world are already signed up and are ready to start using FRIB for their experiments when construction is complete.

FRIB is also key to Michigan State University retaining its national leadership in nuclear physics graduate programs, where it is ranked No. 1 by U.S. News and World Report. And it will provide Michigan high school students with a readily seen example of why they should focus on science, math and engineering to help unlock research secrets in the future.

FRIB has earned the support of Michigan and its congressional delegation, who have worked with other members of Congress to get support in place for the first steps of construction. It received a $55 million appropriation from Congress for the 2014 budget year, and the U.S. Department of Energy and House and Senate appropriations committees are proposing to invest $90 million next year, when Congress returns after the election to finalize the budget.

A project this large, however, will require multi-year commitments by Congress. Outgoing U.S. Reps. Mike Rogers, Dave Camp and John Dingell have joined with their colleagues and U.S. Sens. Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow to ensure this Michigan project is currently funded. To maintain its leadership in this science, and the world, which will benefit from the medical and other discoveries it will reveal, Michigan needs FRIB and so does the nation.

Together, we call on our new members of congress to continue to this momentum and ensure that FRIB receives the strong financial support it – and our state – deserve.

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