Guest column: FRIB research will bring jobs to Michigan, but needs continued funding

By JoAnn Crary

All across Michigan, eyes are on one of the state’s largest construction projects – the Facility for Rare Isotope Beams, on the campus of Michigan State University.

FRIB will be the world’s most powerful rare isotope beam facility, helping to maintain our nation’s international leadership in this important research that can help us understand the universe and examine more than 1,000 new rare isotopes (more than double the number known today), some of which may be used in job-creating applications in fields from nuclear medicine to national security.

This is the kind of basic research that private sector companies wait for federal projects to provide. It’s vital to provide the raw material for the kind of inventions that keep America progressing.

To me, FRIB is another important signal to America and the world that Michigan is back. MSU has assembled a team from around the world to develop and now oversee construction of FRIB, an incredibly complex tool for innovation, and is using many Michigan contractors to move the $730 million project forward.

FRIB is a top priority of scientists around the world, and Michigan’s members of Congress from both sides of the aisle have embraced that priority. Outgoing U.S. Reps. Dave Camp, John Dingell, Mike Rogers and others have joined to push the project forward, along with both of our U.S. senators, Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow.

These men and women have helped guide project funding through difficult waters. With several of these leaders leaving Congress, it’s vital that our incoming members understand how important FRIB is to science, the world – and to Michigan.

- FRIB contractors are providing many skilled construction jobs for several years to come, with workers from across the state at the site today. This summer, a concrete tunnel 571 feet long and 10 and a quarter feet wide is being built underground on the university campus to house FRIB’s linear accelerator which will accelerate a beam of stable atomic nuclei to about half the speed of light. The complete length of building with the tunnel will be 1,500 feet. More than 100 truckloads of concrete are scheduled to be pumped into place in October, the second of four major concrete pours.

- When completed by 2022, FRIB will provide full-time jobs to more than 300 scientists, researchers, machinists and
others. More than 800 top scientists from around the world are already planning to come to Michigan to conduct experiments.

- MSU today has the top nuclear science graduate program in the nation, according to U.S. News and World Report, and graduates 10 percent of the nation’s nuclear physics Ph.D.’s. FRIB will help MSU keep that lofty rank, attracting talent to our state.
- If past experience is a guide, research coming from FRIB will help create new companies and new jobs in our state. Companies such as Niowave are turning concepts from rare isotope research and experience into new innovations – and more jobs. In fact, the entire mid-Michigan region is looking to capitalize on FRIB, its research and the talent that it attracts.

But for FRIB to move forward, Congress must continue to appropriate funding each year. Today, a $55 million appropriation in the 2014 federal budget, along with $94 million from the state of Michigan, is covering project costs. The U.S. Department of Energy has recommended that $90 million be allocated to FRIB construction for the 2015 fiscal year, and the House and Senate appropriations committees have agreed.

Assuming the budget is approved after the election, FRIB construction will continue next year. But each year funding will come before Congress, and our members need to support FRIB for years to come. Failure to appropriate sufficient funds will extend the project timeline and could end up adding costs.

FRIB has enjoyed the backing of business and labor from around the state, along with economic developers. I ask our newly elected members of Congress to join their predecessors in championing FRIB, asking their colleagues to fund FRIB, and bringing this project to fruition for the benefit of our nation and our state.

Do you have a guest column on a statewide topic to share? Email Director of Community Engagement Jen Eyer at jeyer@mlive.com.