

Statement on SB273

Before the Senate Finance and Claims Committee

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Mr. Chairman and members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today on this important educational and health care issue. As you may know, Montana State University-Billings has been a strong supporter of this legislation, not because of the stated location, but because of the statewide implications.

This piece of legislation represents an opportunity for a statewide, open and honest discussion about the future of medical education in Montana. There are many students in Montana and Wyoming right now who would jump at the chance to remain closer to home to study medicine. According to the Association of American Medical Colleges, 117 Montanans applied for medical school in 2004. Of these, 62 were enrolled out of state. The other 55 — or 47 percent — could not gain entry to a program. Similar situations exist throughout the country. In Wyoming and Idaho, 52 percent of the students who applied to medical school could not be enrolled. In Oregon that number is 56 percent and in Alaska that category was at 61 percent last year. Clearly, there are students interested in a medical education.

At the same time, the average age of general practitioners in Montana is rising, disproportionately affecting small communities and placing the health care of their citizens at risk.

So we must ask ourselves: What direction should we take to answer the rising need for physicians and to fulfill an increased interest in studying medicine? What kind of educational system best fits the needs of our state and our citizens in the next generation? What kind of investment should the state make? Where should that investment be made?

These are all good questions and they should be asked. And while many of the details of Senate Bill 273 can be debated — and they should be — the opportunity this bill presents should not be lost.

The time is now to have an elevated discussion about the future of medical education for Montanans – in Montana. There are already health care shortages in the state (nine counties do not currently have a primary care physician, for example), but no overall discussion has taken place to determine if we are dealing with the shortage issue as well as we could. A new voyage of discovery needs to be made.

Any college student will tell you that embarking on such a voyage is never easy. It infringes on zones of comfort and takes a certain amount of courage and creativity. Senator Stapleton's bill provides the vehicle for taking a new voyage

as it relates to medical education in Montana. All that is needed now is the courage to take the trip.

A writer once said "Man cannot discover new oceans unless he has the courage to lose sight of the shore." We will never know what we are capable of regarding this issue unless we take a chance, study this issue and see where we end up.

We at MSU-Billings urge you to approve this bill. It's time for Montana to chart its own destiny.