

EXHIBIT NO. 2DATE: 2-3-05BILL NO. SB 273

Public Health Welfare and Safety Committee Members: Senators
Cromley, Cobb, Esp, Grimes, Moss, O'Neil, Schmidt, Weinberg,
Williams. Room 350, 3PM, Wednesday February 2.

**Testimony by Sheila Stearns, Commissioner of Higher
Education.**

I rise in support of SB 273.

I would like to start by thanking Senator Stapleton. I think this bill is helping to put a spotlight on our state's healthcare worker shortage and it is fueling a healthy discussion on how we serve the medical needs of our rural communities.

The Governor's Blue Ribbon Task Force on Healthcare issued its final report in 2002. That report clearly describes the healthcare worker shortages in many parts of the state and how those shortages will become more severe in the future. The most acute shortages are felt, of course, in our most rural areas.

The growing cost and sophistication of medical technology, for both diagnostics and treatment, continues to drive consolidation into larger centers and clinics at the expense of our smaller, distant communities. But technology and other advances in healthcare delivery also create new opportunity for our smaller communities.

A school of rural medicine could play an important role in taking advantage of that new opportunity. It could also have a positive economic impact on the State.

The question of a new medical school in Montana has been coming up periodically for years. Critics always respond with a similar answer: a medical school would be too costly for the return we would receive on the investment. And, to be fair to those critics, the costs can look daunting, ~~at first blush~~. But we don't really know how a new Montana medical school would be structured and what new approach to rural medicine it might bring. We don't know how much it would cost, what would be the source of needed funding, and how well it would alleviate our rural shortages. All are great questions. We support this bill because it will put the necessary resources into determining these answers.

That said, my bosses (the Board of Regents) feel that in supporting this legislation we do not lose sight of the fact that we do have the WWAMI program in Montana. The WWAMI program provides an opportunity to train physicians for Montana and has provided the state with not only good physicians, but a good network of researchers and medical educators as well. We hope that the planning council created by this legislation will work hard to explore ways to work with this successful, existing program in bringing quality healthcare to all areas of Montana.

Thank you.