New science buildings rise to top of KU's budget wish list

'Major shortcomings' are costing university time, funding and recruiting power, provost says

In this file photo from 2011, Kansas University students wait outside Malott Hall after the building was evacuated following reports of a chemical spill. Enlarge photo

July 24, 2015

Topeka — Kansas University’s aging science buildings have “major shortcomings” — major enough that the antiquated facilities could in the future cost KU its membership in the prestigious research institution club known as the Association of American Universities, KU Provost Jeff Vitter told the Kansas Board of Regents on Thursday.

Moving forward with constructing new integrated science buildings — as called for in the Campus Master Plan unveiled last year — is KU’s top budget enhancement request for fiscal year 2017, Vitter said.

KU is asking for $7 million, phased in at $3.5 million per year beginning in fiscal year 2017. Vitter said that represents roughly a third of the cost; the rest would be funded with money saved through KU’s Changing for Excellence ongoing efficiency initiative, as well as donations and public-private partnerships.

During Thursday’s Regents budget workshop, board members got a look at budgets and priority budget enhancement requests for the next couple years from KU and the state’s other Regents universities.
It’s one step in a long and ever-cycling higher education budget process. The 2015 Legislature appropriated capital projects for fiscal years 2016 and 2017, according to a Regents memo, and during the 2016 Legislative Session amendments may be made to the approved capital appropriations.

Vitter called the construction of new integrated science buildings — and Innovation Way, the larger master plan section they are a part of — the most important one of his time at KU. Tentatively, the plan calls for building two facilities in the Irving Hill area currently home to Stouffer Place apartments, which closed for good this summer.

The average age of KU’s current science buildings is 59 years, and they are fraught with problems, Vitter said.

Electricity outages, explosions and fire alarms triggered by experiments have led to a 30 percent loss in productivity time, he said. Precise temperature control, dust control and water quality needed for experiments also is lacking.

Meanwhile, Vitter said basic chemistry lab enrollment has “zoomed” up and that KU would be “shoe-horning” 28 additional sections into the current lab space.

“These are not mere annoyances and inconveniences,” Vitter said. “In recent years, antiquated facilities have literally cost us millions of dollars in lost grants.”

They’re also the reason a number of faculty chose not to come to KU, he said, including a few Foundation Distinguished Professor candidates.

“They had no interest in being in Malott Hall,” Vitter said.

Donors have made major gifts to enable a number of other new buildings on the KU campus in recent years, including the new school of business and the new home for Naismith’s original rules of basketball, under construction now.

Science buildings housing freshman and sophomore labs, while crucial for recruiting and retaining student and faculty researchers, simply aren’t as exciting for donors, Vitter said.

He noted that science buildings were identified in KU Endowment’s last fundraising campaign, KU First, some 15 years ago but “went nowhere.”

“All it’s getting to be crucial,” Vitter said.

KU Chancellor Bernadette Gray-Little, who spoke during the meeting via phone, said that unlike graduates of professional schools such as engineering or pharmacy, alumni who stay in science “fortunately for science, and unfortunately for giving, often become academics.”

Regent Ann Brandau-Murguia said the science building project aligns with KU’s strategic and physical master plans and that the Legislature has repeatedly said it wants students to be “world-ready.”

She said she hopes the project happens.

“I find some irony that we have a lab that you have clearly explained, if it was a business, would be failing,” she said. “How do you train young people who are interested in science, which is a business in our state, to perform in a real-world lab when you don’t have a real-world lab?”

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KU proposed budget requests
New integrated science buildings are one of three priority proposed budget enhancement requests Kansas University presented to the Kansas Board of Regents during the board’s budget workshop Thursday in Topeka.

The three requests, according to KU:

• Priority 1 — Integrated science buildings for Innovation Way development on the Lawrence campus. Request: $7 million, phased in at $3.5 million per year beginning FY 2017.

• Priority 2 — Support for a 3 percent merit-based salary enhancement at KU Medical Center, where state-funded employees have received just one institutionally supported annual raise in the past seven fiscal years. Request: $3.4 million, recurring funding beginning in FY 2017.

• Priority 3 — More funding for the KU School of Medicine-Wichita, ultimately to help address the state’s “critical” shortage of doctors. Request: $5.7 million, recurring funding beginning with $3.5 million in FY 2017 and another $2.2 million in FY 2018.