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### Commission wants research to be focus in university's future

By Liz Boardman/Independent Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE — The University of Rhode Island must break through the bureaucracy of state government and take control of its own destiny to become a research hub and job creator. So said members of the URI Commission for Research & Innovation during a press conference on Tuesday. The commission is an arm of the state Economic Development Corp.'s R.I. Science and Technology Advisory Council, which has been studying the university's role in economic development since 2006.

A key priority is a \$100 million bond referendum in 2010, which would be used to attract 20 to 30 top researchers to the university.

"We need the state's colleges and universities to be economic engines to strengthen the economy and create better jobs," Saul Kaplan, executive director of the Economic Development Corp., said in an interview on Monday. Kaplan is also on the search committee who will find the university's next president.

Kaplan applauded outgoing President Robert Carothers' work to improve the undergraduate experience and to change the culture of the school.

"But it is time for the next step," Kaplan said.

By 2015, the commission envisions a URI capable of earning \$140 million annually in research funding and achieving a Carnegie Foundation "Research University/Very High Activity" label.

URI has made some progress toward this goal, said Peter Alfonso, the university's vice president for research and development. In September, faculty researchers brought in \$20 million in grants, bringing the three-month total to \$32 million. That is nearly half the \$67 million they were awarded in all of fiscal year 2008.

But gaining traction in R&D has been fraught with roadblocks and missteps.

For example, the university missed out on 12 years of explosive growth in federal R&D funding for science and technology.

According to the National Science Foundation, federal research grants increased by 117 percent between 1996 and 2006. The university increased its awards by 29 percent during this period, but neighbors like the University of New Hampshire were up 271 percent, and the University of Vermont, 162 percent.

When URI did receive funding, research was all too often stymied by state regulations.

Alfonso recalled a faculty member in chemical engineering who received an \$800,000 grant from the National Science Foundation, only to have it take a year to procure the equipment he needed.

"By the time the state purchasing process is finished, the grant time is eaten up," Alfonso said. "They must send annual reports to [the National Science Foundation] for a

three-year grant. If the first year report says 'I haven't started yet,' it doesn't do us a lot of good."

In order to more nimbly respond to opportunities, the commission wants the university to be able to keep, manage and invest institutionally generated funds, rather than keeping it under state control; change university positions so they are no longer state workers but university employees; and a Board of Governors with the power to approve borrowing, without the approval of the General Assembly.

"Our Board of Governors would be very powerful because they would control policy and budget," said Rep. John Patrick Shanley (D-Dist. 35) of South Kingstown, who is not running for re-election. "That is not the situation in other states, like Connecticut and Massachusetts. If, for example, the University of Connecticut wants to add a School of Medicine, those decisions are made by the Board of Governors and the legislature, but UCONN has fundamental control over their budget and destiny. (For the views of the General Assembly candidates, see story, page A1.)

As for the bond issue, Kaplan pointed to Robert Ballard, the internationally known ocean explorer who was lured from Woods Hole to become the director of the Institute for Archaeological Oceanography in the Graduate School of Oceanography.

"We need 20 or 30 more Bob Ballards," Kaplan said. "Rhode Islanders have been supporters of URI with capital investments. Now we need them to invest in human capital."

Both Alfonso and Kaplan stressed that growing research would not come at the expense of a student-centered university, which nurtures undergraduates, Carothers' first priority.

"It is essential to keep both," Kaplan said. "They are not mutually exclusive experiences."

"We talk about a student-centered research university," Alfonso said. "Research provides positive things for both. What we are after is the best scholarship – not only in teaching and learning, but in research as well."

And having the opportunity to study with a top researcher would draw graduates and undergraduates to the university, Alfonso said.

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