

Plan pushed for OU diabetes centers

By Michael McNutt, Capitol Bureau

A proposal by the University of Oklahoma to build a diabetes research and treatment center on its Oklahoma City and Tulsa campuses advanced Wednesday in the Legislature.

Surrounded by about 100 people affected by diabetes, members of the state Senate subcommittee on health and social services unanimously approved legislation creating a legal entity for the center so it can receive funding.

Senate Bill 1056 could go to the full Senate Appropriations Committee next week. The cost for both buildings is estimated at \$15 million.

Legislators will have to determine how to pay for the center: Gov. Brad Henry has proposed including the project in a \$180 million research bond issue; OU President David Boren, citing the state's booming economy, said legislators could make a direct appropriation this session.

"It's just an ideal opportunity," Boren said. "We don't know again when the state will be financially as well off as it is this year."

"It is not an overambitious goal to say that Oklahoma's diabetes center should be in the top five in the nation within three years," he said. "We really can do it that rapidly."

About one in every 10 Oklahomans has the disease, putting Oklahoma at the top among the states, said Boren, who has Type 2 diabetes. American Indians are three times as likely to have diabetes.

Several Indian tribes are working to raise money and develop operating relationships to share the financial burden of the center, Boren said. Private fundraising efforts also are under way.

The subcommittee also approved a measure to expand a health insurance program for small businesses.

The Insure Oklahoma program, which got under way last year, helps small businesses with 25 employees or less buy health insurance for workers. SB 1294 would expand the program to businesses with up to 50 employees.