Jerome A. 'Jerry' Gilbert: Hospital sale could be pivotal for MU, community

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As a relative newcomer to the Tri-State region, I see the coming purchase of St. Mary's Medical Center by Cabell Huntington Hospital, and the subsequent merger, as a potential turning point for Marshall University, the region's health care providers, and our entire community.

This pivotal point allows us to dream about having an internationally renowned health care delivery system; one that could truly rival that of the Cleveland and Mayo clinics. This merger has the potential to not only transform our university and medical school but - with the associated economic development - to also enhance the entire region.

What is needed for such a transformation is a strategic vision and the inherent belief that such a dream is possible. Turning dreams into reality is not new for Marshall University. I look to the visionary leadership of former president Bob Hayes who, along with the medical community and the Huntington VA Medical Center, started Marshall's medical school. Similarly, the late Steve Kopp had a vision to expand the university infrastructure, reinstate engineering, and create a school of pharmacy—all of which came to pass. Marshall, like West Virginia itself, is characterized by an indomitable spirit of initiative, perseverance, and resilience.

Now is the time to seize the moment and capitalize on the marvelous opportunity presented by this merger. I believe that by working with other physicians and allied health professionals in this region, our schools of medicine, nursing, and pharmacy can be part of developing a health care delivery system that is second to none.

At a recent forum at Heritage Farm, community leaders discussed the health care industry as an economic driver for our area. We talked not only about expanding and improving health care but also about attracting businesses that depend on the medical sector to join our area's existing firms, including Alcon and Rubberlite.

In addition to improving the quality of direct health care delivery and the related economic development, expansion of our academic programs will help us form highly competitive and integrated research teams. These teams will allow us to train the highest-caliber health care workers, and to expand our clinical and research productivity.

Many of you have heard me say I want to double externally funded research at Marshall to more than $50 million within the next few years. This academic growth at Marshall will be a game-changer for us. I use the term "us" to convey that Marshall University is your university and that you, the citizens of Huntington and the surrounding areas, are indeed part of the Marshall family.

Raising the national profile of our health care delivery system and our university will benefit the entire community. As the merger of the hospitals becomes a reality, let us be quick to recognize that Marshall University is poised for new greatness and for a new chapter in its history. The entire community will be the beneficiary of further success and that is indeed worth being excited about. Let us transform ourselves by having a vision and realizing a big dream. I, for one, am setting my sights high!

Jerome A. "Jerry" Gilbert, Ph.D., is the 37th president of Marshall University. He took office in January 2016.