

The Honorable Ron Stephens, Dean

Savannah/ Chatham Legislative Delegation

Dear Representative Stephens,

Thank you for taking the time to consider this matter. We are writing to express our concerns regarding the proposed \$170 million budget allocation for the development of a new dental school in Savannah. While we fully support efforts to improve healthcare access and education, we are deeply troubled by the lack of transparency and stakeholder involvement in this decision-making process.

It is our understanding that significant community and professional voices were left out of any discussions surrounding this project. Stakeholders such as existing dental practitioners( the Georgia Dental Association, the Hinman Dental Society, the Georgia Academy of General Dentistry) academic institutions (the existing Dental College of Georgia in Augusta), Dentist Legislators in the Georgia General Assembly ( Dr. Lee Hawkins), State Agencies (GA Board of Dentistry, Georgia Board of Healthcare Workforce)—whose input would have provided valuable insights into addressing workforce needs and enhancing healthcare outcomes. These Community and Professional voices appear to have been purposefully excluded. This absence of collaboration raises questions about whether this investment represents the most effective use of public funds to address healthcare disparities and educational needs in our state.

Transparency and inclusiveness are essential when making decisions that carry such a significant taxpayer financial and societal impact. Without engaging stakeholders, we risk creating a bigger problem than we are already experiencing and that may not align with the actual needs of our communities, potentially leading to long-term inefficiencies or underutilized resources.

We respectfully advocate for greater accountability and stakeholder involvement in the planning process for a project of this size. This should have included hosting public forums, consulting with dental professionals, and ensuring that all voices are heard before moving forward with a project of this magnitude. Furthermore, an analysis that assesses the need for a second dental school should have been completed, and the issues surrounding the proposed dental school evaluated by a task force or work group. This project is not an example of “good government” or “government for the people.”

There are ongoing challenges in dental education and the proposed \$170 million investment in building a new dental school that will directly exacerbate these issues. While we recognize the importance of addressing access to oral healthcare and training the next generation of dental professionals, I urge you to consider how this project intersects with

three critical factors affecting the current dental education landscape: the faculty shortage, the escalating cost of dental education, and the crippling indebtedness of dental students. These drivers of the ongoing crisis were identified in the “Future of Dentistry” report published by the ADA in 2000.

### 1. Faculty Shortage:

Across the country, dental schools are grappling with a severe shortage of qualified faculty members. The current shortage at the Augusta Dental School is severe, with 15 vacant faculty positions. Often, Georgia Dental students have limited clinical access due to a lack of faculty coverage. Often, the disparity between academic salaries and private practice discourages many dentists from pursuing teaching positions. The strong private practice economy is driving the faculty shortage. Adding a new dental school without addressing this systemic issue risks further diluting an already limited pool of educators and compromises the quality of education for future dental students.

### 2. Cost of Dental Education:

The cost of dental education has skyrocketed in recent years, placing financial strain on students and institutions alike. Constructing a new dental school at such a significant cost raises concerns about whether funds are being allocated in a way that directly addresses affordability and access to quality education. Would these funds not be more impactful if used to strengthen and expand existing programs, increase scholarships, or reduce tuition rates? At one time, the dental school in Augusta was almost 50% State -Supported.

### 3. Student Indebtedness:

Graduating dentists are burdened with some of the highest levels of student debt in the nation, often exceeding \$300,000. This debt discourages graduates from pursuing careers in underserved areas or academia, limiting the profession’s ability to address both workforce and educational needs. Rather than creating additional capacity for dental students, it is imperative to focus on reducing the financial barriers that hinder their success and limit their career choices.

Investing \$170 million in a new dental school may perpetuate these problems rather than solve them. A more strategic approach could involve:

- Collaborating with existing dental schools to enhance faculty recruitment and retention through competitive salaries and incentives.
- Increasing funding for scholarships and loan forgiveness programs to reduce the cost burden for students.

-Expanding infrastructure and resources at current institutions to optimize their capacity without the financial and operational risks of starting a new dental school.

We advocate for a more holistic and sustainable approach to addressing the crisis in dental education and maldistribution of dentists statewide: Investing in solutions that address faculty shortages, affordability, and student indebtedness will have a far greater impact on the future of oral healthcare in our state than a new \$170 million dental school.

One idea to consider, that has been discussed by dental colleagues and dental faculty, would be to utilize the \$170 Million to open dental clinics in underserved areas of the state. These clinics could be operated by faculty, volunteer dentists, and dental students. This would allow dental students more clinical opportunities, provide affordable dental services to people in the most underserved areas of the state, and help accommodate a larger class of students to be enrolled at the current dental school. Again, this would allow more dental students to be trained and to provide services to those most in need in the state of Georgia. Having these types of clinics versus a new dental school would eliminate the need for an entire new faculty at a new and separate school.

Thank you for your attention to this matter, we appreciate your commitment to serving our state and ensuring that taxpayer dollars are used responsibly and effectively. Please let us know if there is any additional information we can provide or any way we could discuss this issue face to face.

Sincerely,

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This letter was initially written by Felix Maher, DMD with the Undersigned Signatures contributing input and additional comments into the body of the letter.

Felix Maher, DMD served on the Governor's Georgia Health Strategies Council from 2002-

2006 and the MCG Dental School Task Force from 2003-2004. The MCG Dental School Task Force was charged with advising the state of Georgia on the need for a new dental school and expanding the dental school class size. The same problems affecting dentistry in the State then, still exist today. Interesting to note, that the dentist to population ratio in 2003 was 48 per 100K and after building the new \$112 M dental school in Augusta and expanding its class size to 100 students, 20 years later the dentist to population ratio for Georgia has only increased to 49 per 100.

Felix T. Maher, DMD