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Mayor Paul R. Leonard interview conducted on April 17, 1985 about the Boonshoft School of Medicine at Wright State University

Paul R. R. Leonard

James St. Peter

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WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
School of Medicine Oral History Project

Interview date: April 17th, 1985

Interviewer: James St. Peter

Interviewee: Paul R. Leonard
Mayor of Dayton

James St. Peter: My name is James St. Peter, and this is an interview with Paul R. Leonard, mayor of the city of Dayton, Ohio. The date is April 17th, 1985, the time is 10:00am, and Leonard and I are in his office in the Dayton Municipal Building. More questions than I am going to have time for, at the current time. My schedule is extremely flexible, my work schedule is whatever I can get, and I would like to schedule another interview with you for a longer period of time.

Paul R. Leonard: The answer is no, I can only do so much.

J.P.: Well, okay. That's all I can get then. Thank you. What I would like to know is, what was your position when you first heard of the School of Medicine's planning, the plan for a school of medicine here in Dayton? Were you state representative at the time?

P.L.: Yes, I was a member of the legislature at the time and was very supportive of the project. We felt that it would be good for the community, and it would be especially good for Wright State University, which at that time was right on the cutting edge of being a local commuter school and a school of some national prominence. We felt that that could be the factor that would elevate the school into some semblance of national prominence, so we were very supportive of it. We also felt that in the state of Ohio, there was a crying need for doctors, and a new medical school is certainly not a guarantee that you will have more doctors in your state and in your community, but we thought that if a commuter school were to receive a school of medicine that we had a greater chance with that kind of an atmosphere to encourage young people to stay in the state of Ohio and practice medicine in the state of Ohio once they graduate. Usually a commuter school draws from people in the surrounding area, people who are ingrained into living and working in this community. We felt we had a better chance to keep them here, so I was very supportive of the project.

J.S.: Who are some of the other legislators in the area who were supportive?

P.L.: At that time, I don't know of anyone who was against the project. Some adopted a wait and see attitude. Clara Weisenborn was out front on the project at the time in the state Senate. C.J. McLin was very helpful in the House of Representatives, he had an argument that minorities would have a better chance of getting a medical education at a commuter school, and therefore he was very supportive of the situation. For the most part, the entire delegation, I felt, was supportive of the project. Larry Chrisman at that time was a member of the legislature and also

supported the project, John Scott was the Greene County representative and supported the project. The only difficulty was the eventual debate which pitted us against Northern Ohio, in whether we needed the medical school or they needed the medical school, and the eventual compromise was two medical schools, one for the south and one for the north.

J.S.: How would you characterize the passage of the bill through the legislature, through the house?

P.L.: It was a difficult process because the governor was not enthused about the establishment of new medical schools at that time. He had nothing against Dayton or Wright State University, but he felt that it was a very costly investment for the state of Ohio and the budgetary process, which was approaching the point of being strained in those days. He wasn't convinced at that time that there was a crying need for new medical schools in Ohio. He was convinced that there was a need for doctors but was not sure that a medical school in Ohio would guarantee that people would stay in the state, that they might take state aid, get their medical degree, and go elsewhere to practice. Since the house of representatives was controlled by the democratic party at that time, and I think the senate was, I'm not sure, but the house was heavily democratic at that time and the speaker of the house had a very close relationship with the governor. It became a difficult uphill process for us, it required us to go against the governor's wishes, and choose between our governor and the project.

J.S.: Did the local Democratic Party ever officially endorse the bill?

P.L.: I don't believe they did.

J.S.: Was there widespread involvement on behalf of the McLin bill on the part of state and well, on the part of county democrats?

P.L.: I knew of no one running for political office in the greater Dayton community who didn't support the project. I think there was a general outpouring of support from politicians at all levels of government.

J.S.: On both sides?

P.L.: Yes, on both sides of the aisle.

J.S.: When you were in the house, did you ever testify on behalf of the School of Medicine proposal?

P.L.: I was a co-sponsor on the legislation whether I went before the finance committee and testified or not, I probably did not. We had C.J. McLin on the finance committee for direct input, and he was the delegation leader at that time, we trusted that he would exercise proper input. I remember a number of press releases that were issued to generate support and I did my fair share of doing that. We spoke at a number of community meetings on behalf of the project so that we could stimulate a letter writing campaign in support of it, but I don't recall ever testifying in front of the finance committee.

J.S.: How would you characterize the interactions between your delegation from Dayton and the northeast Ohio delegation?

P.L.: Well it became a situation where we eventually had to work as a team. It became quite clear that we had the political prowess to kill their project, they had the political prowess to kill our project, and that there needed to be a compromise. It was either a situation where we were going to be able to agree on one medical school, agree on no medical schools in Ohio, or agree on one for your community and one for ours, we'll support yours if you support ours. And in the final analysis, that was the agreement reached between the two delegations, and at that time, other than the Cuyahoga county delegation, the delegation from northeastern Ohio and Youngstown/Canton/Akron area, and the delegation from Dayton area were the two strongest democratic delegations in the house, other than the Cuyahoga County delegation. So together, we had considerable input with our own party, its leadership and with the governor.

J.S.: Did you have any interaction with the Ohio Board of Regents?

P.L.: I had no personal interaction with the Ohio Board of Regents although I do remember that they were not enthused about the proposal.

J.S.: Did they say why?

P.L.: They reflected the governor's point of view, that they just weren't convinced that there was a crying need for new medical schools in Ohio and that even if we established new medical schools it was not a guarantee that that we could keep the students in the state to practice medicine.

J.S.: Were there any vocal centers of opposition in the Ohio house or the senate to the medical school proposal?

P.L.: I don't recall anyone leading the charge against either medical school. I think there were a number of weary individuals who had to be convinced of the need, and the realistic proposition that the people would remain in state and invest their professional career in the state of Ohio. We felt that the key was to get the funding for the project in the budget that it was unlikely for the House of Representatives or the senate to move against the proposal of the medical school, it was akin to being against motherhood. That if we could get the budget into the project that we had an excellent chance of success. So the battle was really fought in the finance committee and in keeping amendments on the budget away from the medical school proposal.

J.S.: The governor established a special task force to look into medical education after the bill hit the house. Were you put on that task force?

P.L.: No.

J.S.: Who were some of the area legislators who were on that task force?

P.L.: I can't recall.

J.S.: At what point in time did the governor become reconciled to the idea that there was in fact going to be a medical school in Dayton? Was there a specific point at which you can say that the governor relaxed his opposition?

P.L.: I don't know that he ever relaxed his opposition. I think he became a realist. After an occasion that we were, and when I say we the Montgomery County democratic delegation, was asked to come to his office one morning, and it was after something had occurred in the committee in favor of the medical school, and I'm not sure whether it was a final vote on the funding or a subcommittee report which included the funding, but it was met with praise by the legislating delegation, and he called us to his office because there was a front page story in the Dayton Journal Herald indicating that the medical school was taking a step toward reality, regardless of the governor's opposition and he was not pleased with that story and was not pleased with the performance of our delegation, and was frankly angry. He thought it was politically embarrassing to him that we were running roughshod over his neat exercised logical point of view, with respect to the budget, and tried to get us to convince us that we needed to postpone our effort until there could be greater study into the need for medical schools in the state of Ohio and the delegation took the position that we were just at odds with the governor on this one. We felt he was on the losing side of the issue and it was easy for him to say and tough for us because we were expected to represent our local constituency and there was this outpouring of support for the medical school, particularly from the greater Dayton community, and that politically we felt it needed to be a reality. That was a tough confrontation, between the governor and the democrats from legislative delegation. In the final analysis, we left the office with the same position we had when we entered the office, and I think he became resigned to the fact that legislatively it was going to be a reality.

J.S.: After the initial authorization was passed, was there any difficulty in getting additional funds given the budget situation that you were in at the time?

P.L.: I don't recall any difficulty. And when I say the strains of the budget it certainly was not a strained as the Ohio budget has been in the last couple of years. Keep in mind that governor Gilligan had within a year or two prior to that debate, had been successful in convincing Ohioans that there was a need for a state income tax, and the state income tax had just been implemented. As a matter of fact I think it was implemented just before I went to the state legislature in 1972, and this debate must have occurred during my first term. It was more than a decade ago. So there was some newfound monies, if you will, in the state budget. The governor was making a plea, which I have now made to my people as mayor, that just because you have this newfound wherewithal you can't rush out and be in a hurry to spend it. And one of the most expensive investments that a government can make is in a medical school because it never ends, it just keeps coming back and needing more money to survive and grow. So I remember that caution, but I don't recall us ever wrestling with the problem of getting additional funding.

J.S.: What were the steps taken once the bill was written by yourself and C.J. McLin?

P.L.: Well, I just remembered that it was- I don't recall other than it being introduced into the house and then sent into the finance committee for consideration, and then in the meantime it was our job to go out and whip up public support for the project, because C.J. had certainly had some conversations with the governor and he had indicated an initial opposition to either proposal, the northeastern medical school or the Wright State medical school. So I don't recall that we did anything different than to keep reminding people in the greater Dayton community how important this project was to the Dayton area.

J.S.: When it was in the finance committee, was there any difficulty keeping concern in the committee or getting it out of the committee?

P.L.: That's difficult for me to answer because I wasn't a member of finance committee, C.J. would probably be in a better position to answer that question. It was not an easy process, there were a lot of cost conscious people who had come through the time in the state budgetary process when there wasn't that newfound wherewithal and that it was always a struggle to balance the state budget and they were very wary of making expenditures that might come back to haunt them in the future. Especially when the debate began to indicate that there was to be two medical schools. A lot of people really got nervous. So it wasn't an easy process in the finance committee and frankly in my opinion had it not been for the fact that we had two very senior members of the legislature, one on the house finance committee, C.J. McLin, and one in republican leadership in the senate, Clara Weisenborn, the proposal might have died, but because of the muscle that each of them were able to exercise in their respective houses we had a good chance at success.

J.S.: Who was the speaker at the time and did they have any particular concerns about the proposal?

P.L.: In my first term it was a guy called A.G. Lancione [ph], and I think that's when the debate occurred, right around 72-73 as far as I can recall. He was not a strong speaker, he was a nice man. But he really didn't exercise the kind of discipline that Vern Rife has exercised since he's been Speaker of the House of Representatives, and even though he was cognizant of the governor's point of view, he was also cognizant of the need to please his democratic members in the house of representatives, so I don't recall him taking a strong position either way on the issue. He just kind of let the chips fall where they may on this one.

J.S.: Did the impact of the cost overruns incurred by the Toledo medical school have any impact on...

P.L.: I remember that argument, now that you've mentioned it. I remember the Toledo medical school and the cost overruns did become an issue. It became an issue for people like the governor, who were convinced that we could contain the expenditures for either or both medical schools so it did become an issue.

J.S.: Was there an impact caused by educators at Ohio State, University of Cincinnati?

P.L.: There was some, yes there was some indication. I always felt that the pressure was directed at the board of regents. There was some indication that some of those educators feared or were not convinced that the competition in that area was necessarily the best thing for doctors or for the Ohio medical profession. It was a gentle opposition, it certainly wasn't an outright opposition but we always had the feeling that schools like Ohio State and Cincinnati, schools that had medical schools were not in and out supportive of the project.

J.S.: Did you have any organized dialogue or interaction with the Wright State personnel on the issue of the medical school?

P.L.: Time and time again we were meeting with President Kegerreis, and the dean of the medical school at that time...

J.S.: Dr. Beljan?

P.L.: I'm not sure if he came after the medical school was given birth or came in the middle of the debate. I thought that Fred White was involved somehow. Fred White I think used to be president at Wright State University so maybe we were dealing with him as president and Bob Kegerreis wasn't there at that time, but in any event I remember several times in which we were invited to the president's house on the campus of Wright State University to interact with proposed personnel and medical school personnel and administration at Wright State University to make sure that everyone was in line and supportive of the project.

J.S.: Do you feel now that the School of Medicine has lived up to the things that people were saying about it in support of it when it was being developed?

P.L.: Absolutely, if for no other reason than that it has remained out of the headlines and it has not been a source of debate in legislature, at least not high-profile debate since it was given birth. It has also created projects like Dr. Petrosky's projects with biomedicine and I think that's been good for the Dayton community and its given Wright State University the national prominence that we thought it needed. As a matter of fact I think that the Wright State medical school has been a greater success than the northeast medical school but perhaps that is because I live here and I'm more acquainted with that school.

J.S.: What constituency, what district were you representing at the time?

P.L.: I was representing House District number 37. The number has changed since that time. It included the city of Oakwood, all of east Dayton, north of Dayton, and that was basically it. And that was an issue that cut across republican and democratic lines, I had an interesting district, a very republican city of Oakwood and a conservative democratic community in the east Dayton area, but that was an issue that kind of cut across republican and Democratic Party lines and received general support throughout the community.

J.S.: Did you ever have to go back to the district and organize support for medical practitioners and medical societies?

P.L.: No. I always felt they were supportive of the project.

J.S.: How do you feel the record of the school of medicine to date has impacted minorities in the area?

P.L.: It's difficult for me to make a judgment on that because I don't know what the record of minority graduates has been at Wright State University; I'm assuming that C.J. stays on top of issues like that. I've heard no complaint. You have to assume that something must be going well when you don't hear those kinds of complaints. But it's still a difficult question for me to answer. I'm not privy to that kind of information.

J.S.: How would you rank your involvement with the school of medicine, among other issues that you were involved with as the state representative?

P.L.: Over my career it was the high profile issue. I probably spent as much time on that project as any other issue in the legislature. Of course I was a freshman legislator at the time, it was a good government issue, it captured a lot of attention, a lot of press activity, it was generally supported in the community, so it was a good hook. Not only did I believe in it but it was a good political hook at the time and it became a cause for many of us, and allowed us not only to fight for doctors and professional medicine and healthcare, but it allowed us to exercise some independence from a governor that had a reputation of trying to dominate democratic members of the general assembly so it served a number of purposes. That's why I think most people were on board on the issue.

J.S.: Do you feel that the Dayton delegation could have worked through a proposal without the assistance of the northeast?

P.L.: I doubt it. I think the politics required that kind of coalition.

J.S.: Do you remember what the general limits of the vote was when it was finally taken?

P.L.: As I recall, the crucial vote was on the budget and the budget is usually divided along party lines so it was difficult to say that the vote was on the medical school, the voting was on the budget and if it's a democratic budget it generally gets democratic support with a few republican members and then republican opposition. The opposition to the budget cannot be assumed to be opposition to the medical school. That's tough to judge. The feeling I had in the legislature was that there was overwhelming support for the proposal of the two new medical schools in Ohio.

J.S.: Well I'd like to thank you for taking the time to talk to me.

P.L.: And what we can do is after you get a little deeper into your project I won't rule out the blanket of opportunity for follow-up questions, because I know you may after you talk to some other people you may have to come back to me and compare points of view. Why don't you call and we'll see what we can do then to help you. I don't know that I would have a whole lot of time to do another follow up interview of greater length, but I can certainly help you tie the loose ends together if there are some additional questions that need to be answered.

J.S.: Okay, thank you.

P.L.: Alright Jim.