

January 16, 2007

# Spitzer Wants New York to Enter Stem Cell Race

By [NICHOLAS CONFESSORE](#)

ALBANY, Jan. 12 — Five years ago, the Bush administration decided to severely limit federal financing for embryonic [stem cell](#) research, a move that set off vigorous competition among the states to provide support for a research field that many scientists say could bring about major medical advances.

New Jersey was first out of the gate, pledging millions of dollars for stem cell research in the state. California raised the stakes with a huge \$3 billion bond initiative, and other states followed with ballot initiatives or legislation to give scientists grants or to build research centers. Those efforts, supporters promised, would also bring in new jobs and tax revenue.

But New York — home to leading research universities, medical centers and biotechnology companies — has remained absent from the list. Legislative efforts in recent years to direct state money to embryonic stem cell research have stalled, and then fizzled.

Now, state lawmakers are preparing to move forward on what would be the most ambitious government-financed stem cell project on the East Coast.

In his first address to the Legislature, Gov. [Eliot Spitzer](#) called this month for passage of a \$2 billion 10-year bond initiative for research and development, at least half of which would be set aside to pay for stem cell research. And the project is being tailored as an economic development effort in the hopes of attracting support from upstate Republican lawmakers.

Advocates for stem cell research say that if successful, the initiative — by pledging a sizable investment over a sustained period — would catapult New York to the forefront of the field. They also say that bringing the state's academic and scientific institutions more into the research mix could have significant ripple effects across the country.

“The real value is that if New York is involved, you suddenly have an ability to make a leap in progress across the country's best minds,” said David Bluestone, a spokesman for Americans for Stem Cell Therapies and Cures, a national advocacy group. “You never get advances from one lab in one state. You need this to be happening across all the states with the best research institutions. California can't go it alone.”

The initiative, a centerpiece of the Spitzer administration's economic development agenda, would have to meet the approval of the State Senate and Assembly before it could go before voters. Lt. Gov. David A. Paterson, a former state senator, is to be in charge of shepherding that effort through the Legislature.

Besides the bond measure to pay for stem cell research, the administration has proposed a law to ensure the legality of the research within [New York State](#).

Polls commissioned by supporters of the embryonic research show that overwhelming majorities of New York voters support state financing for it. But the administration may still face significant hurdles in the Capitol, and beyond.

Several times, the Democratic-controlled Assembly has passed legislation to finance embryonic stem cell research and ensure its legality.

Similar legislation proposed in the Senate in previous years by two [Democrats](#) from Manhattan, Mr. Paterson and [Liz Krueger](#), never made it to the Senate floor, where legislative business is tightly controlled by the Republican majority leader, Senator Joseph L. Bruno.

Many members of Mr. Bruno's caucus, however, support such research, especially senators from upstate cities desperate for the public and private investment it could spur.

In remarks in Albany last year to advocates of stem cell research, Mr. Bruno said he would support state funds for the research. He and Mr. Spitzer's predecessor, Gov. [George E. Pataki](#), called for an \$800 million public-private research fund for research in medical and life sciences, to which the state would contribute about \$200 million. But that never came to fruition.

Moreover, that proposal did not specifically protect or authorize money for embryonic stem cell research, instead leaving grant decisions to a board appointed by the governor and legislative leaders.

"We thought this approach was responsible and balanced," said John McCardle, a spokesman for Mr. Bruno.

He said the Senate leader would wait until the Spitzer administration produced a formal proposal before taking a position. Mr. McCardle would not say whether Mr. Bruno would specifically support state financing for embryonic stem cell research, but said, "We're wide open in terms of looking at what the governor will support."

In a speech on the campaign trail last year, Mr. Paterson laid out details that the administration hopes will help assuage some voters' moral qualms about the new proposal. The legislation, he

told an audience at New York Presbyterian/Columbia hospital, would ban reproductive cloning and create an independent review board to devise guidelines for what research could be financed.

The grants themselves would be subject to peer review by a new Stem Cell Commission, which would also be responsible for enforcing the research guidelines. Those measures, Mr. Paterson said, would ensure that all embryonic research in New York was “legal, vital and ethical.”

Opponents of the research dismiss the precautions as insufficient and say that taxpayer money should go only to research on adult stem cells, which does not require the destruction of embryos.

Many scientists say, however, that adult stem cells are of limited value to researchers because they are less able than embryonic stem cells to develop into other kinds of cells, like skin or bone tissue, and do not multiply as readily.

The opponents also point to a study published online this month by the journal Nature Biotechnology indicating that some stem cells drawn from amniotic fluid donated by pregnant women could be as potent as embryonic stem cells, a breakthrough that may make the use of embryos unnecessary.

A spokeswoman for a group opposed to the Spitzer initiative, Kathleen Gallagher of the New York State Catholic Conference, said: “We are gravely concerned, and we would oppose such a bond act. We recognize that they say they will ban cloning, but what they’re talking about is banning the cloning of live born babies, but funding the cloning of human embryos that will be destroyed for research.” The conference is the public policy voice of the state’s Catholic bishops.

The stiffest resistance to the initiative, however, may come from voters worried less about the proposal’s moral implications than its cost. New York voters have historically been skeptical of bond measures, and according to a memo prepared last year by advocates of embryonic stem cell research, only half of the bond referendums proposed over the previous three decades earned voter approval.

Should the Legislature approve a referendum for this year, the measure would also be opposed by the state’s Conservative Party and by anti-[abortion](#) forces.

“The bond issues that are successful tend to be the ones that are very focused on tangible public services,” said Edmund J. McMahon, a fiscal analyst at the Manhattan Institute, a nonprofit conservative public policy center. “Bond issues that are soft-focused generally don’t do well.”

The stem cell initiative, he said, is “a mixed bag.”

“You have someone in office who is about change and fiscal discipline,” Mr. McMahon said of Mr. Spitzer. “But you have a state that already has a huge amount of debt.”

To win support for the initiative from upstate lawmakers, the administration is promoting it as primarily an economic measure. In his speech, Mr. Paterson cited upstate research universities and centers in Albany, Buffalo and Rochester, whose officials have lobbied heavily for more state money for the research.

“The best stem cell researchers in the country are in California, Wisconsin and New York,” said David A. Carmel, a supporter of the research who helped create the Spitzer administration’s proposal. “To have major restrictions on federal funding, and no state funding here — many talented researchers in New York are disgruntled with this state of affairs.”