

Scripps Florida: Hyped bio-tech boom went bust

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Elected officials come and go. But their policies, good or bad, may affect us for years. Once again, Jeb Bush has failed the Florida Governor's Assessment Test (FGAT). Four years after he left office, we're reeling from the \$1.5 billion cost of the biotech boondoggle he foisted on us. He promised us a silk purse of an investment, but he's stuck us with a sow's ear.

In 2003, Jeb became obsessed with luring California's Scripps Research Institute to Florida. He called it "a seminal moment in our state's history" — the magic wand that would make us a world leader in biomedical research and development and jumpstart our economy. He hurriedly called a special session of the Legislature and made it pass a one-time \$310 million gift for Scripps *from federal stimulus monies* that were allocated for Florida. [Palm Beach County](#) anted up about \$269 million to pay for land and buildings for Scripps.

Of course, some of the \$310 million could have been used to offset a \$40 million cut for state universities and the end of enrollment in the Healthy Kids children's insurance program that same year. But Jeb was quoted saying, "There is no better way to spend the one-time federal economic stimulus money than by investing in a project that spurs targeted economic growth. This investment will return more growth and revenues down the road." Shades of Bernie Madoff, he estimated the state return on its investment at 44.8 percent.

Estimates of the Scripps Florida economic miracle were predictably pie-in-the-sky. Depending upon who was hyping, it would have 545 employees after seven years and 2,800 after 15 years. But as of June 30, 2009, at the end of year six, Scripps Florida employed just 321. Estimated "spin-off" jobs in other companies were vastly overblown — from 6,500 to 40,000 to 50,000. According to the Florida Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, "in Fiscal Year 2004-05, Scripps had only supported the creation of a projected 615 full-time and part-time equivalents," and "in Fiscal Year 2007-08, it had supported the creation of just [an estimated] 1,327 jobs."

In 2006, as a direct result of Jeb's promised biotech bonanza, the Florida Legislature established the Innovation Incentive Program, which funds businesses like Scripps that would expand or locate in the state — and that could "serve as catalysts for the growth of existing or emerging technology clusters." But a 2010 OPPAGA report reveals that, though the program has invested over \$449 million to bring seven major biotechnology research institutes to the state, and local governments have provided matching funds of nearly \$526 million, for a total of \$975 million, it's been a bust. Most of the new

companies that have come to Florida have not done so because the seven grantees were here. The two that did come had a total of six employees as of the last quarter of 2008.

Meanwhile, Jeb hallucinates. According to a published report, last December, he visited Scripps to pat himself and the staff on the back: "Florida has gone from what I would call a nothingburger [What, Jeb?] in the life sciences space to one of the top eight, top seven, top six states. The execution of this idea was first-rate." Execution, maybe; delivery, no!

Florida has no business ever funneling any taxpayer dollars to enterprises to stimulate economic development — even if a know-it-all governor steamrolls a lapdog Legislature into doing his bidding. If redistributing money to the poor is socialism, so is lavishing it on corporations. Florida has spent your *real* tax dollars (cold, hard cash), but we've gotten promises and hot air in return.

Some people think Jeb walks on water. But the truth is that Florida's biotech investment is underwater because of him. Some people say he should be president, so he can do for the nation what he did to Florida. I say, God help us from drowning.