A COUGAR WITH TEETH

UH, Houston: Tier One track

Community supports the university's goal because it will be good for the city as well

By BENH KHAIR

In my first two years as president of the University of Houston and chancellor of the UH System, I've learned many things about the city whose well-known name we share. Which freeways get crowded, where to buy good Rowdy's, and, of course, "San Felipe, which has the best barbecue and why it's not the heat, it's the humidity. I've also learned that the city of Houston truly appreciates the importance of higher education.

Even in the economically challenging times we all face, Houstonians have demonstrated a generous and, therefore, enlightened support of their premier public university. While many institutions across the country and in our state have struggled with notable declines in the charitable donations they receive, UH has remained an exception to that trend. Yet oddly so. Annual giving to UH increased 17 percent in 2008 and 19 percent in 2009, rising from $48 million to $71 million during that period. In fact, UH had both the greatest total dollar increase and largest percentage increase in private support during the past three years among all major public universities in Texas. In other words, while other Texas institutions were reducing their fundraising in an array of ambitious plans—and considerable progress—to transform UH into a Tier One university, and Houston gives it, genuinely understanding that this crucial transformation simply won't happen without the community's support.

New economic realities have directed us to look to private support to help us take the next critical step toward Tier One. Fortunately, our community's expectations are being realized. The donors of Texas recently approved a critical constitutional amendment (Proposition 6) that establishes potential funding for UH and six other "emerging research universities" as we most certainly criteria in our respective pursuits of Tier One status. However, this funding remains a few years away. In the meantime, we will continue to support our scholarship programs.

TIER ONE

Of 27,000 donations a year, many are small, and all help create a powerful $100,000,000 endowment. Just one example of 27,000 annual donations that have come, for instance, from your friends and neighbors, from any corpora- tions and local businesses and from foundations. The range of gifts vary is from the modest to the extreme magnificious, but they share one common motivation—to help improve this school and, by extension, the community. This community benefi- cians are taking place, I believe, because UH has become an inevitable realization joining Houston a better city.

At UH, we are focusing on creating an Energy University for the Energy Capital of the world, on expanding a health initiative that builds on and beyond our membership in the Texas Medical Center, on expanding our already recep- tional partnerships, in holding consensual competitive academic programs, and, crowning this all, on a commitment to student success that never before has been achieved in our community. President Rice once said in his 2004 state-of-the-union address that our university is in a special state of crisis. UH is in a special state of crisis.

Eventually, we have told Houstonians that these are things that are important to us. Believe that Houstonians have listened. We need to do a better job of telling Houstonians that these things are important to us, too. The grading level of private support to our univer- sity proves that this is no idle statement. And, in one sense, this is a thank you note for the many gifts where the people and institu- tions of Houston have seen fit to give us.

But this is also an ICQ, if you will, a preliminary note that acknowledges our obli- gation to pay it back as UH becomes an even more power- ful engine of economic devel- opment for Houston and the state, where we are providing ever more globally prepared graduates who are protec- ting the leaders in the work force, and when we are increasingly relied on as a hub of innovation for solving new ideas and creating solutions to problems society wrestles with every day. In this debt we will gratefully repay—and with considerate interest.

Khaire is the president of the University of Houston and chancellor of the UH System.