UTSI plans major changes in shifting focus to research

By LINDA BARR
The Sunday News Staff Writer

Major changes are in the works for the University of Tennessee Space Institute as its focus shifts from providing graduate education to promoting economic activity in the region.

A name change for the institute is planned, although the new name has not been announced.

Dr. John Caruthers, associate vice president of UT and chief operating officer for the Space Institute, discussed the institute's revitalization plan, among other topics, at a UTSI Support Council meeting Tuesday.

Caruthers, charged with painting a picture of UTSI for new members, presented a history of the institute, a run-down of its revitalization plan and a progress report.

Dr. Bill Kimzey, Support Council chairman, introduced new members and explained the major byproducts of UTSI — better educated people and useful research products for the good of the nation and communities.

While UTSI has long operated primarily as a graduate educational institution, more emphasis will now be placed on research and obtaining research funding, he said.

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The revitalization plan, which Kimzey said has been approved by the UT Board of Trustees, includes the following:

- Major rapid reconstitution of faculty — one position has been filled; four remain open.
- UT executive vice president Eli Fly to guide jumpstart of large research programs.
- UTSI to report administratively through UT executive vice president.
- Name change to mark beginning of new era.

UTSI —

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UTSI has helped make aircraft lighter and more efficient and played a role in landing the first man on the moon in 1969 — Neil Armstrong.

"We've learned how to use lasers to do remarkable things," he said. "There are many points of pride at the Space Institute."

While academically, UTSI is part of the graduate school at Knoxville, its aviation systems department is unique. No undergraduate programs are offered at the institute.

During the 1960s, '70s and '80s, the institute was in a growth mode, driven by a large population of part-time students. That trend peaked about 1985, with the enrollment of 300 students, Caruthers said.

During that time, UTSI landed a large single technical contract that brought in more than $110 million during a 20-year period, the equivalent of about $225 million in today's dollars.

However, during the past eight years, research funds declined and professors have retired, Caruthers said.

"We weren't able to replace the professors — the lifeblood of the institution."

"Members of the Support Council gave us the support we needed to live, thrive and grow again during weak times at the institute," he added.