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Supercomputer casts state as high-tech leader

By Frank Bruer

MONTGOMERY - Gov. Guy Hunt opened Alabama's door to the high-tech age a notch wider yesterday by signing a \$38.7 million contract for a supercomputer to serve education and industry in the state.

Hunt and officials of the Boeing Co. signed a document expected to crank up the high speed computer in February to a statewide network of potential users.

Capable of performing 250 million calculations per second, the supercomputer will be capable of space, medical and drug research, defense system analysis, weather forecasting and architectural and construction planning, along with experimental fields.

The state will pay Boeing \$6.2 million this year and \$6.5 million annually for the next five years to provide the computer hardware and train personnel for the system.

The computer mainframe will be located in Cummings Industrial Park in Huntsville and accessible from nine regional "nodes" geographically spread across the state. "This is a great day for Alabama," Hunt said at the signing ceremony.

Jim Woodward, executive vice president of the University of Alabama at Birmingham and chairman of the Alabama Supercomputer Authority, said the project in this state is the first in the nation to give research universities and industries joint access to that type of technology.

High-speed computer nodes will be located at UAB for the Birmingham area, the University of Alabama at Huntsville, the Tennessee Valley Authority National Fertilizer Development Laboratory at Muscle Shoals, the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, Auburn University, the University of South Alabama in Mobile, Troy State University and the Alabama Finance Department in Montgomery.

Cost of the contract will come from annual appropriations from the Special Education Trust Fund.

State Finance Director Robin Swift Jr. said those funds normally would have gone for university research projects anyway.

Boeing will begin training personnel immediately. The building housing the computer equipment at Huntsville will be completed in November.

The supercomputer is scheduled to be operational by next February. After five years, the state will own the equipment.

Woodward said there presently are about 250 supercomputers in the world but only 12 or 13 are available to universities. and only about half that number are in the United States.

He said the supercomputer will be extremely important for complex drug research at UAB.

"There will be an arsenal of drugs coming out that are designed on computers," the university official said.

Computer design eventually will cut out lengthy hit-or-miss experiments on drug research in laboratories, he said.

Research universities will have free access to the high speed computer, which has a 36 million word memory. Private industry will pay full cost for access to the computer facilities at a rate currently estimated at \$1,000 to \$1,500 an hour.

“This is indeed a pivotal time in the history of this state,” Woodward said. “It places the state squarely in the forefront of what is a major international technological thrust in advanced computing - supercomputing. It is going to make an extraordinary impact on universities certainly, but we think also on the industries in this state.”

He said Alabama's reputation as a forward thinking state in committing to research and industries already has spread.

Woodward was invited last week by the governor of Virginia to explain to officials of that state how Alabama has accomplished the project.

“There was no question that there was a great deal of admiration and some surprise expressed there,” he said.

Woodward received a call Friday from Australia, where Bond University is considering acquiring that country's first supercomputer and wanted to know how Alabama accomplished its goal.

The supercomputer project, pushed strongly by former Gov. George Wallace, has been in the works for more than two years.