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### **Slaying the golden goose**

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Whether the times are lean or not, taxpayers expect government to make smart spending decisions. Sometimes, that means trimming the budget. But it shouldn't mean cutting it in a way that could prove more costly in the long run.

Such is the case with Maryland's stem-cell research program. Following a legislative analyst's recommendation, a Senate budget subcommittee last week reduced [Gov. Martin O'Malley's](#) proposed funding for stem-cell research from \$23 million to just \$5 million next year, a 78 percent cut.

No doubt the senators are extremely pleased with themselves. The analyst had recommended axing the entire \$23 million. Why? For one of the more absurd reasons imaginable - because the Maryland Technology Development Corp. (TEDCO), a quasi-public agency that administers the 2-year-old program, hasn't been spending the grant money fast enough.

This is the kind of rationale that encourages agencies to spend first and ask questions later. There are plenty of worthy stem-cell research projects to finance, but TEDCO's peer review process doesn't follow lockstep with the state's fiscal calendar.

A 78 percent reduction will do more than draw out the funding timetable. It sends a message that Maryland doesn't value biotechnology and the life science industry as much as states such as Massachusetts, New York and New Jersey that are spending far more.

That would be a major mistake. The importance of the life sciences to Maryland's economic future is clear. A recent study found Maryland has the potential to be the nation's leader in this fast-growing field, and the payoff is huge. Spending in the sector represents more than 11 percent of the gross state product.

Stem-cell research, particularly investigations that aren't banned from studying embryonic stem cells, merits substantial public support. At least that was the rationale in 2006. Or was the program merely an effort by Democrats in the legislature to embarrass an incumbent Republican governor?

The Senate's actions give credence to the latter theory. In the real world outside the State House, scientists need steady, multiyear financial commitments to bring research projects to fruition. With a paltry \$5 million left in the kitty, the General Assembly might as well cut the whole program - and post a sign warning visitors that stem-cell research isn't welcome here.

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