While medical schools across the country are stalling or even reversing enrollment growth, Dr. Barbara Schuster in Athens is quietly building her branch campus of the Medical College of Georgia School of Medicine.

"It is moving along," said Schuster, the dean of the branch campus. "We're focusing on the first two years because that is what is facing us as Aug. 9 is only a few months away."

Concerned with an anticipated shortage of physicians in coming years, the Association of American Medical Colleges has been urging its members to increase enrollment by 30 percent by 2015.

And schools have responded -- 110 of the 125 schools have expanded or have plans to expand, said Edward Salsberg, the director of the Center for Workforce Studies for the AAMC.

The number of accredited schools went from 125 in 2002 to 132, with eight new medical schools under review and discussions under way in 11 additional communities, he said. But the recession, which has hit state budgets hard, is now curbing that effort, said Salsberg, whose annual survey of medical school enrollment will be released in a few weeks.

"What we found is that the long-term trend for growth continues," he said. "But definitely the recession has had an impact on the pace of expansion. And for the first time we're seeing a number of schools planning on retrenchment and cutting back enrollment."

About a dozen medical schools are cutting back on enrollment, while some planned new schools, such as at the University of California at Merced, have not moved forward. It is a particular concern in Georgia, Florida, California and Texas, which grew rapidly over the past 30 years while medical school enrollment did not, Salsberg said.

"I am pleased that (Georgia has) been able to continue to look at expansion," he said.
In Athens, Schuster still has a few faculty positions to fill, with 16 full-time and four part-time hired so far. By August she would like to have 25 full-time and up to 10 part-time on board.

"We try to recruit them in order to help plan, but not too early so that the person is not without an active role," Schuster said.

Working with the University of Georgia, which is helping to create the branch campus, has been a help, she said.

For instance, the original budget called for two instructors in neuroscience, but a faculty member at UGA is stepping in to help plan and teach, she said.

"So in a sense that has been a saving," Schuster said.

That first class of 40 medical students will be seated in August as 190 colleagues set up shop at the main campus in Augusta. Only 26 have been accepted for the Athens branch so far. Admissions officials have finished interviewing potential students and then will assign them to each campus based on criteria that include GPA, academic rank and gender so that the classes are as much alike as possible, Schuster said.

Clinical rotations, which the students will do in their third and fourth years, have yet to be set for Athens, but the new campus has a list of more than 150 physicians in northeast Georgia who have expressed an interest in helping.

"We have a very large list of people, which keeps growing, actually," she said. "That is not (at) the top of our priority list because it's not the most acute need for the students who begin August of 2010."

A year from now, UGA is scheduled to acquire the 58-acre Navy Supply Corps School campus, which eventually will become the home of UGA's School of Public Health and the branch medical school. How quick and how extensive the renovations are to that campus, however, might be affected by the economic woes.

"Nobody is talking too much about how much renovation. There are no plans of grandeur ... that I've seen," Schuster said.

Fortunately, the branch campus can stay in its newly renovated building on UGA's campus until the new home is ready, she said.

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