

Alachua's biotech boom

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Published: Wednesday, May 21, 2008 at 6:01 a.m.
Last Modified: Tuesday, May 20, 2008 at 11:58 p.m.



AARON DAYE/The Gainesville Sun

Susan Griswold, laboratory manager for Pasteuria Bioscience, takes samples of growing bacterial nematode controlled product in her lab at the Sid Martin Biotechnology Incubator on Tuesday.

A multimillion-dollar industry is blossoming in the city of Alachua, leaving nearby communities eager for a piece of the action.

Biotechnology - which uses living organisms to solve problems in areas such as agriculture, food sciences and medicine - has taken over the 200-acre Progress Corporate Park in Alachua, housing 30 different companies.

Tuesday at the Fifth Annual Celebration of Biotechnology, some of those companies showcased their technologies, such as diabetes research or improving how drugs are administered or improving the effectiveness of toothpaste.

While some of the technologies have gone global and more than 2 million patients have received tissue implants from the cornerstone company, Regeneration Technologies, part of the biotechnology story in Alachua is what it could do for the local community.

"It is producing real live jobs," said David Day, director of the University of Florida Sid Martin Biotechnology Incubator.

There's no doubt the biotechnology industry is booming, Day said.

"There are economic cycles and sometimes it's more robust than others," Day said. "Right now it's very robust. We anticipate that it will be solid for another year or two and after that there could be a downturn for a year or two, but not a dot.com bust."

Approximately 1,000 people are employed at Progress Corporate Park and Wendy Wacker, spokeswoman for Regeneration Technologies, said those jobs have qualifications that range from a high school diploma to multiple graduate degrees or a Ph.D.

"What really needs to happen from a community standpoint is being able to support that with a trained work force," Wacker said.

The community in Alachua is aiming to do just that in partnership with Santa Fe Community College's construction of the \$6.8 million Charles R. and Nancy V. Perry Alachua Corporate Training Center.

Literally across the street from Progress Corporate Park, located on U.S. 441 east of Alachua, the training center will be focused on providing that work force for the industry.

About 75 percent of the companies at Progress Corporate Park began in the University of Florida incubator program and then split off to create a publicly traded for-profit corporation.

The most prominent of those is RTI, a company that focuses on making human tissue clean and safe for human transplant.

At the event Tuesday, the president of RTI painted a bright future for the company, which he said made \$150 million in sales this past year.

"Our technology has rendered tissue absolutely safe," Guy Mayer said. "There have been over 2 million transplants without a single infection."

Mayer said he expects the company's sales to grow by 25 percent over the next year. He cited a recent merger with the German-based Tutogen as something that will only strengthen the company.

North Central Florida has 34 biotechnology companies, which is behind only South Florida, which has 43 companies, according to the Florida BioDatabase.

Gainesville city officials have long been envious of the booming industry in Alachua, which is often touted for its high-paying jobs and environmentally clean aspects.

And talks have focused around how to attract biotechnology companies within the Gainesville city limits at future sites, like the current Gainesville Regional Utilities downtown site and the envisioned Depot Avenue corporate park.

"We've been involved in those discussions a long time," said Day, who in his position at UF has a pivotal role in working with incoming or developing companies. "It's a decision of the real estate developer, where he wants to put it."

In November, UF announced an agreement with a national real estate agency to build a 160,000-square-foot life-sciences lab on campus.

Brent Christensten, president and CEO of the Gainesville Area Chamber of Commerce, said the interest in the Gainesville area by Alexandria Real Estate Equities Inc. was a "third party" confirmation that this is a hot-spot of activity for biotechnology.

Whether or not Gainesville will be able to replicate the long-fostered boom in Alachua is uncertain. Christensten said the real aim is to complement the success.

"I think there's more than enough of this biotech industry to go around," Christensten said. "Hopefully we can convince a lot of these companies to stay right here and build large facilities and employ hundreds of people."

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