

Mass. opens BIO arms to neighbors

Mass High Tech: The Journal of New England Technology - March 2, 2007

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Mass High Tech

Kathy Chapman

Mark Robinson, acting president of the Mass. Biotechnology Council, is extending a helping hand to other New England states for BIO.

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With plans to attract further growth in the life sciences, Rhode Island officials plan to have a pavilion for the first time at the world's largest annual biotechnology convention, which is taking place in Boston this May.

In fact, all six New England states will be there -- a first in the 14-year history of the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO) International Convention.

And while the BIO convention is perhaps the ultimate venue for state officials to pitch global life sciences companies, Massachusetts industry leaders have encouraged a strong showing from Rhode Island and the other New England states.

Rather than working in competition with its neighbors, the convention preparation so far has taken on a collaborative approach among New England states -- a contrast to the way individual states have often competed to attract biotech companies and their high-paying research jobs.

Case in point: Rhode Island's biotech industry leaders gathered in Providence early last month to learn more about the opportunities and what to expect at the 2007 BIO show. At that meeting, the acting president of the Massachusetts Biotechnology Council, Mark Robinson, was there to encourage his Ocean State counterparts to attend.

"We certainly want to look at ourselves as partners with neighboring states," Robinson said. "We are stronger together."

New England stakes raised

More than 10 organizations from Rhode Island plan to share a pavilion at BIO, including Brown University, the Slater Technology Fund, Lifespan hospital network and several other stakeholders in the state's life sciences sector.

"The whole state is excited about (the international convention) being in New England, and we are rallying all the stakeholders in the life science space (to attend)," said Saul Kaplan, executive director of the Rhode Island Economic Development Corp., the quasi-public agency that has rented space at the event for companies and institutions in the state.

With BIO being in their own back yard, New England state groups are also taking the opportunity to raise their profiles with larger pavilions. At past BIO shows, groups from Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont have shared booth space, in part to reduce costs to each. This year, Maine officials plan for the state to have its own space. And Vermont and New Hampshire have decided to share an area that will have double the amount of space than that which the three states combined occupied last year.

The New Hampshire Biotechnology Council views BIO as "an economic development effort to attract companies," said president Paula Newton. Her group also plans to host a dinner reception for industry leaders on an evening during the conference to promote New Hampshire.

The 2007 BIO is expected to draw more than 20,000 attendees and 1,700 organizations to the event's venue at the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center.

Kaplan said that the Ocean State has made progress in growing its life sciences sector that is worth showing off during BIO. Last year, Connecticut-based Alexion Pharmaceuticals Inc. chose a facility in Smithfield, R.I., to renovate in order to produce its drug Soliris. And Rhode Island's Science and Technology Advisory Council awarded \$1.5 million in research grants earlier this year to spur economic growth in the industry.

Connecticut plans to roughly double the size of its booth at BIO, aiming to showcase the more than 49 biotechnology companies as well as institutions involved in the field such as Yale University and the University of Connecticut.

"We thought because it's right next door we would have a more impressive presence," said Paul Pescatello, president and CEO of Connecticut United for Research Excellence (CURE), a nonprofit that represents the biotech industry in the state.

With the largest cluster of biotechs in New England, Massachusetts also has the largest pavilion for BIO among states in the region. The state's biotech council has leased five times as much space as it did for last year's BIO convention in Chicago, and will be hosting enough room to offer separate booths to about 120 organizations from the state.

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