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A perfect storm for life sciences brews in Central Massachusetts

AS I SEE IT

By Christopher M. Palatucci

A storm has been brewing in Central Massachusetts for some time. The epicenter of the storm is Worcester, and the winds of economic growth are being fed by recent developments in the regional life sciences industry.

Several events may seem like little squalls, but collectively they contribute to a storm that can either catapult the region into unprecedented economic development, or could crash over us like a tidal wave, sinking our ship.

A key element of the storm is WPI's major investment in Gateway Park. It ultimately will encompass more than 50 acres of research, commercial and residential space in a formerly depressed area. It will bring jobs, increase the local tax base and generate commercial activity downtown — all based on the exciting opportunities in the life sciences.

The awarding of the 2006 Nobel Prize to UMass Medical professor Craig Mello put the spotlight on the institution and on Worcester. One biotech company already has been established on the discovery, and RNAi doubtlessly will continue to spawn research, commercial activity and investment in the region.

Gov. Deval L. Patrick's 10-year, \$1 billion life sciences initiative is a boon to local companies. Part of the funding establishes a stem-cell bank at UMass Medical School. Providing unfettered access to these critical research tools is a master stroke. In the three years since the announcement of California's \$3 billion stem-cell initiative, legal wrangling has prevented any funding of research, and access to cells is a major roadblock.

In another sign of the commitment to the region, Mr. Patrick and Lt. Gov. Timothy P. Murray of Worcester chose Worcester's Abbott Bioresearch Center as the site for their recent biotechnology roundtable with regional leaders.

There are a number of other contributing storms of note. May's meeting of the Biotechnology Industry Organization brought 15,000 industry leaders to Boston. Leading pharmaceutical companies continue to locate major facilities in the area, including Bristol-Myers Squibb's plans for a manufacturing facility at Devens, and a widely rumored plan for another pharmaceutical company there. A group seeking local investments in the life sciences has formed the Boynton Angels.

Other assets include: the regional lab at Tufts' veterinary school; the soon-to-be-completed Route 146 to Interstate 290 connection, linking Worcester and Providence, another city with an emerging life sciences presence; and the continued westward migration of biotech startups seeking relief from the high costs of doing business in the Boston/Cambridge metroplex.

Central Massachusetts, particularly Worcester, is ideally suited for the new growth industries of biotech, cleantech and nanotech. This is a region that was once famous for product-oriented companies relying on a skilled labor force to produce innovative products (Reed & Prince, Wyman-Gordon, Norton, to name a few). The new industries are simply a modern spin on the region's tradition — it's in our DNA.

While all the elements for success are there, it will not occur on its own. It will require financial and

regulatory support from open-minded legislators; willingness of the investment community to fund reasonable risk; visionary community leaders who will seek out and benefit from the experience of others who have had to hoe this row before; true collaboration and alignment with similar regional efforts; well-conceived educational and work force training programs; and a remedy to the continued exodus of talent for areas of the country with similar economic opportunities, but with perceived lower costs of living or “better” climate.

Many of these elements currently exist. However, one of the key elements is the willingness of Worcester to align itself with others in order for the region to continue to keep its place as a technological hub.

According to a recent report prepared by the University of Massachusetts’ Donahue Center for the Massachusetts High Technology Council, in the period 1998 to 2004, Massachusetts dropped from 5th place in rank to 7th of the top 10 states in biotech employment, while North Carolina moved from 10th to 8th. Over a similar time period, North Carolina experienced a 304 percent increase in biotech venture capital, moving from 7th to 4th place, while Massachusetts held steady in 2nd place, after California.

Massachusetts is poised to reverse this unsettling trend, but it will require collaboration — for some, a new concept.

Through a formal relationship, Worcester, Boston and Providence could generate significant regional growth by forming a Northeast response to the North Carolina “research triangle” of Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill.

The alternative is for the Central Massachusetts region to continue to compete against Boston, and on a national and international level. That would result in a perfect storm which would, at best, blow against us and at worst capsize our nascent regional efforts.

Together, and by including Providence, we have a tremendous opportunity to capitalize on the recent advances and discoveries in the life sciences that have been made in our own back yard, and direct the winds of the perfect storm in our favor.

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