



On the biotech bandwagon

Communities pitch sites, fast-track lab OKs

By Scott Van Voorhis | Tuesday, July 15, 2008

The passage of Gov. Deval Patrick's \$1 billion life sciences bill has cities and towns across the Boston area scrambling for a piece of the biotech pie.

Mayors and town managers from across the metro area are pushing grand plans to lure fast-growing biotech and life science jobs to their communities, from Somerville to bucolic Lexington.

"It is a very attractive, dynamic market to tap into," said Robert Richards, president of Richards Barry Joyce & Partners.

Somerville Mayor Joseph Curtatone is touting a 100-acre site of former industrial land he hopes to reposition as a biotech haven. It's just two miles from Kendall Square, a global mecca for the industry.

Curtatone believes there's room for at least 2 million to 3 million square feet of biotech development. And the sites are in the patch of a planned expansion of the Green Line, which should further boost their attractiveness.

"We believe it's the next stop for lab space," Curtatone said.

But he faces stiff competition.

Developers in Burlington have rezoned millions of square feet of space, previously restricted to office or other commercial uses, for use as lab space as well. Nordblom Co.'s Northwest Park, for example, can now accommodate up to 2.5 million square feet of lab, life science and office space.

A biotech company that wants to build in the park can be ready to start construction in six months, said Robert Buckley, a senior partner specializing in land use and real estate at Riemer & Braunstein.

Under intense market pressure, most biotechs don't have the luxury of taking years to win town or city approvals to build a new research campus, he said. "The days of someone coming and saying work with us and in two years we will get the permits and approvals are over," he said.

Meanwhile, Lexington is making an aggressive bid as well. The upscale suburb recently nailed down a deal with Shire Pharmaceuticals to build a new complex there, offering a mix of state and local tax incentives.

Overall, new buildings and lab complexes are needed throughout the suburbs to accommodate the expansion of the biotech and life sciences industry, Richards said.

"If you need something large and new, you can't find it," he said.