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Grant to boost Innovation Campus, biotech startups

Chris Dunker

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The University of Nebraska-Lincoln will use a \$750,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce to build biotechnology lab space at Nebraska Innovation Campus for small and start-up companies.

Together with unused construction funds to match the federal Economic Development Administration's grant, UNL will create a “biotechnology connector program” to stimulate economic growth in fields from agriculture to pharmaceuticals.

Within months, 10,000 square feet of vacant space at the Food Innovation Center will become laboratory space for up to eight small companies a year for the next nine years, said Matt Erskine, deputy assistant secretary of commerce for economic development.

“This investment will help the state leverage a strong ag sector with new, innovative businesses and even new industries,” said Erskine, who leads the EDA.

“It will also help by filling a gap in Nebraska’s industry and research community,” he said.

Businesses seeking laboratory space to develop new products or test existing ones often find difficulty in securing affordable rates.

It's something UNL has heard from many of the small biotech companies it has recruited to Innovation Campus, Chancellor Harvey Perlman said.

“This is a problem all start-ups face,” he said. “They usually have the resources to lease space, but they do not have the resources to build wet lab space.”

The Food Innovation Center was designed with this problem in mind, Perlman said.

The fourth floor of the former Industrial Arts Building was intentionally left vacant while UNL searched for the means to build out the area. So-called wet laboratories involve chemicals, drugs or biological matter handled in liquid solutions or volatile phases.

Working with the state Department of Economic Development, state leaders and Bio Nebraska, UNL located the competitive EDA grant and applied.

Erskine said UNL demonstrated the need and its willingness to partner with other public agencies and the private sector in creating an incubator-like environment for small and start-up biotech companies.

“Oftentimes, these projects are too risky for private investment,” Erskine said. “Also, the state and local finances aren’t at that level, so we are able to come in with an investment to jump-start the project.”

Erskine said the EDA will continue working with UNL on the project, reporting the job creation and private investment tied to the biotechnology connector in annual reports to Congress.

Innovation Campus already has a head start, he said, as the university and state have demonstrated “skin in the game” important to the long-term sustainability of the project.

“We want to see that local buy-in because that shows commitment by the community - - in this case, the university and the state -- to the project,” Erskine said.

Perlman estimated the labs could be available to be leased in about six months.

When they are, several small UNL start-ups have indicated interest in leasing lab space, said Ronnie Green, NU vice president for the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

The interest by biotech companies could also play a part in the direction of the next building at Innovation Campus, currently in development by Tetrad Property Group, Green added.

Rob Owen, chairman of Bio Nebraska, said lab space will help existing companies grow, while also becoming a recruiting tool for other companies to locate in Nebraska “from all over the world.”

One of those companies, launched by Great Plains Biotechnology CEO Dr. Tyler Martin, himself a University of Nebraska at Kearney and University of Nebraska Medical Center graduate, will take part in the connector.

Martin said the affordable lab space and proximity to other start-up companies and resources are key to driving innovation in the growing field of biotechnology.

“These are the spaces where ideas get turned into product concepts,” Martin said.



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Chris Dunker covers higher education, state government and the intersection of both.

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