Biomanufacturing keeps moving along on SouthCoast

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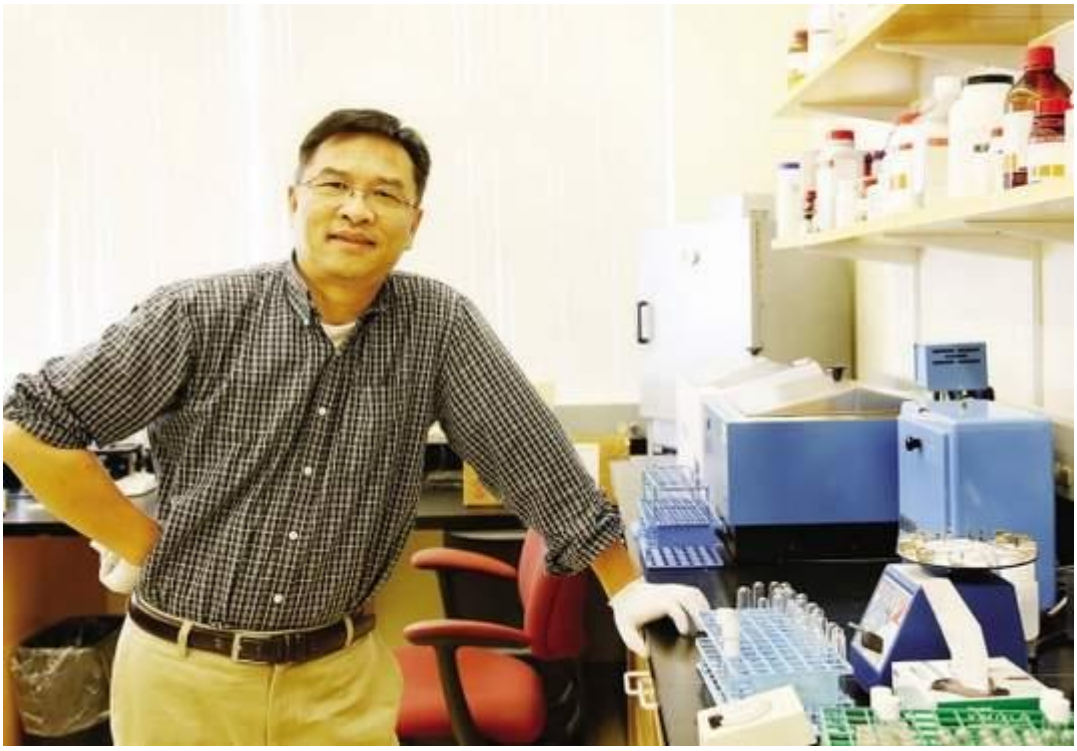
Dr. Wendell Yang of Imgen BioSciences, left, and Dr. Meijia Yang of Boston 3T Biotechnologies work on projects at the UMass Dartmouth Advanced Technology & Manufacturing Center in Fall River.

Dr. Meijia Yang of the start up company Boston 3T Biotechnologies

The Advanced Technology & Manufacturing Center, located at 151 Martine Street in Fall River



Dr. Wendell Yang of Imgen BioSciences, Inc., a biotechnology company.

Dr. Meijia Yang of the start-up company Boston 3T Biotechnologies, which was founded by a group of scientists from pharmaceutical industry and academia.

Billed for years as a game-changer for the SouthCoast economy, biomanufacturing is making slow but steady progress from the New Bedford Business Park to the Massachusetts Accelerator in Fall River.

The region already is home to several advanced medical device companies, notably Five Star Surgical, Symmetry Medical and Morgan Advanced Ceramics, which manufacture products that are distributed globally.

With the promise of delivering well-paying jobs, a host of other groups are looking to attract biotechnology and life sciences companies to the area, including the New Bedford Economic Development Council, the city of New Bedford, and the SouthCoast Development Partnership.

At the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, the Advanced Technology and Manufacturing Center hosts 13 startups, including biotech companies, and is looking to add more. Also, the Massachusetts Accelerator for BioManufacturing in the Fall River Biopark — whose oversight has now been transferred from UMass Dartmouth to the UMass Medical School — will soon open its floors to a new fleet of startups.

PROMOTING NEW BEDFORD

New Bedford is rated as a platinum community by the Massachusetts Biotechnology Council, meaning that its readiness factor is high when it comes to streamlined permitting, robust infrastructure and pre-permitted biotech sites, according to New Bedford Mayor Jon Mitchell.

"Biotech companies or startups looking to grow their business would join existing medical device manufacturers in New Bedford," he said. "New Bedford is a good fit for these kinds of businesses."

The New Bedford Economic Development Council is collaborating closely with other partners in the region, including the South Coast Development Partnership, to continually market to biotech companies, according to Mitchell.

"We are attending trade shows and connecting with universities. We are currently working through a strategic planning grant funded by Mass Life Sciences Industry to help identify next steps. The New Bedford Economic Development Council is meeting with internal and external experts to help develop a plan to grow more of these opportunities," he said.

New Bedford offers a competitive cost of doing business both in terms of wages and the price of real estate, he said. For examples, industrial and residential real estate costs are 50 percent to 90 percent lower in New Bedford compared to Greater Boston and wages are 20 percent to 40 percent lower, according to a brochure widely distributed at tradeshows by the city and the NBEDC.

Given its relative proximity to the Greater Boston area and its high profile research institutions, New Bedford is well positioned to benefit from biotech industries, according to Roy M. Nascimento, president &

CEO of the New Bedford Area Chamber of Commerce. "New Bedford is still in Massachusetts, and it's still relatively close to the epicenter of the industry."

NEW BEDFORD BUSINESS PARK

Every new biotech job results in another job or two elsewhere in the city, said Thomas G. Davis, executive director of the Greater New Bedford Industrial Foundation, which runs the business park.

The New Bedford Business Park, located off Exit 7 on Route 140, is home to a "very vibrant cluster" of life science companies, including six medical device companies.

Describing biotech as a "hot sexy area," Davis said he is actively working to court biotech startups or companies to the park.

But the competition is steep. At a recent biotech trade show in San Diego, 45 states had large marketing and promotion booths with many a large number of foreign companies present. In comparison, at a trade show in New York, only five states were present, Davis said.

At the tradeshows he attends annually, he touts the park's many amenities: one of only two industrial parks in the state with state Master Plan approval from all regulatory agencies; five million gallons per day of spare water and sewer capacity (especially beneficial for biotech); cheaper borrowing due to its location in a low-income census track; and ability to obtain city and town permits within 60 days.

The promotion may be paying off, as Davis said he is "very close" to clinching deals with two new biotech companies. For both, they are expected to put a final package together during the late fall, he said.

ATMC

The University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, in the midst of its effort to establish itself as a research university, hopes to develop high quality research that can be commercialized. The Advanced Technology & Manufacturing Center, which it recently acquired from MassDevelopment for $11.4 million, is integral to that effort.

The 60,000-quare-foot technology facility, located near the intersection of Routes 195 and 24 in Fall River, is part of the South Coast Research and Technology Park. Its goal is "to provide advanced technology and manufacturing solutions, through industry and university partnerships, to meet current and future business needs," according to its website.

The incubator currently has 13 companies in residence, said Keith Mackenszie, research/partnering & facilities project manager at ATMC.

Of these, two are biotech: Boston 3T Biotechnologies and Imgen BioSciences. Boston 3T is a startup that has filed patents for core technologies including virology, cell biology and immunology, protein engineering and cancer vaccines. Imgen BioSciences focuses on the discovery and development of diagnostic and immunotherapeutic agents in the fields of cancer and infectious diseases, as well as food safety rapid tests, among other research and services.

This month, ATMC is adding another biotech business to its roster: United Kingdom-based WoundCheck Laboratories — which is focused on developing novel wound diagnostics products to help improve therapeutic outcomes in wound care. The company moved its offices from Quincy, and will remain at ATMC until it completes FDA clinical trials for the U.S. market, according to Mackenszie.

In the meantime, Mackenszie said the ATMC has some additional space available and is actively seeking qualified candidates.

ACCELERATOR FOR BIOMANUFACTURING

The Massachusetts Accelerator for BioManufacturing, located in the SouthCoast Life Science and Technology Park off Route 24 in Fall River, is also gearing up to attract biotech companies and startups.

UMass Dartmouth announced last spring that UMass Medical School, based in Worcester, would operate the accelerator's 35,000 square-foot facility instead of UMD. "The Medical School has tremendous capability and experience in that arena," said John Hoey, assistance chancellor for strategic communications, media relations and special projects at UMass Dartmouth.

The facility is focused on accommodating traditional biologic therapeutic products, new types of products using stem cells and tissue engineering, as well as biomaterials, biofuels and green chemistry products.

While the opening was originally slated for September, it is expected to provide companies with the ability "to test biomanufacturing processes, train their current and future workforce and provide a unique research facility at production scale," according to Mark Shelton, associate vice chancellor at the UMass Medical School. "It will be a blend of research, academia and manufacturing."

To date, the medical school is still putting the final touches on the facility. "There is still some activity in finishing off parts of the interior. That work is ongoing as is the planning of the facility."

Shelton declined to specify a time frame for opening, but did say the medical school is well equipped to take on this endeavor, as it operates similar incubators in Boston and Lowell. "It's very much within our skillset."