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Friday, Feb. 22, 2008

Maryland bioscience poised to bloom, FDA chief says

State's industry can exploit developments in medicine

by Steve Berberich | Staff Writer

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ANNAPOLIS — Maryland is well-positioned for exponential growth in biosciences because of a “profound transformation in the history of medicine” now under way, according to Andrew C. von Eschenbach.

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The commissioner of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration told a Biz/Bio conference of about 300 biotech and government leaders this week in Annapolis that “what you are doing today in Maryland is very important to the future of this country.”

A radical change “in how we deal with disease is changing the model of health care to one more personal, pre-emptive and much more participatory,” Eschenbach said. The old way of microscopically observing the manifestations of disease has given way to a new molecular perspective to actually understand the mechanisms of disease.

Maryland’s strength in biotech and medical research infrastructure potentially puts the state at the forefront of that change, and now is the time to catch that chance for growth, said Eschenbach and other speakers.

The Baltimore-Washington, D.C., bioscience cluster is one of nine such areas nationwide that get three-fifths of all National Institutes of Health funding, said Blake M. Paterson, CEO and co-founder of Alba Therapeutics in Baltimore. He said the local cluster ranks first in its number of researchers and scientists with 45,000, third in bioscience companies, fifth in total bioscience employees and sixth in venture capital deals.

Maryland’s biotech efforts can make it a leader in cutting health care costs, said James C. Greenwood, president and CEO of the Biotechnology Industry Organization: “There is an innovation-friendly environment in this state.”

The conference was the latest in many powwows of state bioscience leaders to share strategies on how to better market the state’s resources.

With few exceptions, discussions mirrored a similar gathering three years ago by many of the same participants.



Charles E. Shoemaker/The Gazette
 Teresa A. Colella, manager of the Johns Hopkins University's technology-transfer office in Laurel, chats with James H. Meade of Meade Consulting Enterprises in Germantown following Wednesday's Biz/Bio conference at the Westin Annapolis.



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same participants.

This time, speakers congratulated each other for taking initiatives to enhance biotech and business incubators, advisory committees and tax credits. This week’s conference also took an initiative to invest the state employees pension

funds in local biotech and related companies, which Indiana, Michigan and Florida already do.

Paterson suggested that the state take a page from the Indiana bioscience game plan. Indiana has invested in six local and national funds, which in turn invest in Indiana life sciences businesses. Paterson said the fund perhaps is having “some success” because it will be going to the same venture capital groups more than once.

But Maryland’s government is far behind some other states in funding the industry, he said. He cited California which is spending \$300 million a year on stem cell research; Florida, with \$1 billion of its employee pension fund invested in bioscience; Massachusetts’ recent commitment to provide \$1 billion for biotech development; and North Carolina’s investment of \$14 million portion of its tobacco settlement funds in biotech.

Paterson said the fundamentals for the Maryland region to become the nation’s most vibrant cluster are in place. Baltimore has greatest potential because the cost of doing business there is lower than in Montgomery County’s technology corridor, he said.

Biotech entrepreneur Paul Silber outlined a paradox. Maryland is a “hot bed” of bioservice companies and contract research organizations surrounded by a strong infrastructure of research facilities and research parks.

But what is lacking, Silber said, is a pool of capable CEOs to run those bioscience companies. The region also lacks coordination among the different life science organizations in the state, he said.

Silber recommended that Maryland expand its \$6 million biotech tax credit and establish an institution that coordinates the life sciences organizations in the state.

Another speaker, H. Thomas Watkins, president and CEO of Human Genome Sciences Inc. in Rockville, is also chairman of the state life sciences advisory committee charged with writing a strategic advancement plan.

He said Boston and California biotech clusters are located near universities with easier access to technology, and Maryland lacks a large pharmaceutical company nearby. But he said the state’s major obstacle is lack of funding.

“We are in a race with a number of other states,” Watkins said, and the state needs to step forward or languish.

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