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Biogen Idec may shift headquarters to Weston

Biotech would join other Cambridge firms seeking lower suburban rents

By Todd Wallack, Globe Staff | October 3, 2008

[Biogen](#) Idec Inc., one of the state's largest biotechnology companies, is considering moving its corporate headquarters from Cambridge to Weston, which would add it to a growing list of Cambridge biotechs that have jumped to the suburbs because of lower rents and more options for office space.

"It's sort of the natural evolution of these things," said Biogen Idec chief executive Jim Mullen. "The cost of running a business in Cambridge is pretty high."

Mullen said it makes sense to move corporate jobs to the suburbs, where rents are half as much as in Cambridge and workers would have an easier commute from Worcester, southern New Hampshire, and other areas where housing costs are lower.

"It's an employee attraction," he said. "If you want to live in the city, you still can."

But Mullen added that it is vital to keep Biogen Idec's research operations in Kendall Square, near the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, to make it easier to retain and recruit scientists. It also plans to keep a small drug manufacturing plant in Cambridge.

In the past a year, more than a half dozen Cambridge biotechs have moved to the suburbs. Amag Pharmaceuticals Inc. moved to Lexington last month. Altus Pharmaceuticals Inc. plans to move to Waltham later this month. And earlier this year, Shire Human Genetic Therapies said it will build a headquarters and manufacturing plant in Lexington.

Mullen said Biogen Idec is in "reasonably well advanced" negotiations to lease a 350,000-square-foot building scheduled to be built on Boston Post Road, just west of the routes 128 and 20 interchange in Weston. The company is also considering other options, such as expanding in Cambridge or moving to an alternate site in Waltham. But for now, Mullen said, "The Weston site looks like it is the best fit for what we are doing." The company plans to make a final decision by the end of the year.

Biogen Idec has 1,600 employees in Cambridge and another 200 in Wellesley. If the company goes forward with the Weston site, Mullen said, it would likely shift a few hundred corporate jobs from Cambridge and Wellesley to the new offices. The new site would also provide space for new employees.

But the move probably wouldn't take place for about two years. "There's nothing there," Mullen said of the Weston location. [Boston Properties Inc.](#), which owns the site, declined to comment. But Susan Haber, Weston's town planner, said the company has secured the necessary permits to build.

Another prominent Cambridge biotech, [Vertex Pharmaceuticals Inc.](#), has been considering moving its corporate headquarters to a new building in Boston's growing Fan Pier neighborhood as the company outgrows its campus in Cambridgeport. Joshua Boger, Vertex chief executive, said the company plans to make a decision about where to expand by year's end.

While Cambridge and Boston remain desirable for companies, companies often have more options if they are willing to move farther out. Commercial real estate firm Colliers, Meredith & Grew estimated that as of the third quarter, there was a 17.8 percent vacancy rate in the suburbs, compared to 12.2 percent for Cambridge and 9.3 percent in Boston. Rents averaged around \$24 per square foot for most office space in the suburbs, compared with \$43 in Cambridge and \$51 in Boston.

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