

Burlington Union

Biotech industry spreading

By Arthur Katz

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Burlington -

Long centered in Cambridge with access to the scientists at Harvard and MIT, the biotechnology industry, working primarily on the development of new medicines, has been moving outward over the past seven years to the Route 128 corridor, where rents are considerably lower. The industry has concentrated in Waltham and Lexington, developing significant communities of companies in both locations.

According to information from the real estate firm of Cushman and Wakefield, at least 27 biotech companies, including 19 from Cambridge, have moved into Lexington and Waltham since 2001. None have opted to make Burlington home.

Patriot Partners wants to change that, making biotechnology the focus of the industrial component of the Land Locked Parcel development.

Burlington's water resources are one of the elements contributing to the town's non-participation in biotech: the town gets its water, not from the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority, but from surface water and wells in town.

Protecting those sources led to the creation of a water resources district and an aquifer district. The zoning bylaw prohibits laboratory activity in both areas, significantly decreasing the number of possible development sites. Additionally, placing laboratories in districts where it is allowed can only be done with the issuance of a special permit from the Planning Board, which can be an expensive and lengthy process.

Even in planned development districts, such as Northwest Park and the Gutierrez redevelopment site on South Avenue, where the establishment of laboratories may be written into the terms of the development, they are subject to the aquifer and water resource prohibition and the need for a special permit.

The Aquifer and Water Resource Districts are overlay districts, and "the prohibitions and restrictions of these districts continue to apply when property is rezoned, even to a Planned Development District," said Burlington Planning Director Anthony Fields.

Another element that has not been in Burlington's interest has been the tendency for biotechnology companies to cluster together.

“Biotech companies like to be near one another for some reason, said Lexington’s Senior Planner Aaron Henry. “Perhaps it’s the interactions with the people in other companies. Whatever it is, once one company in the industry chooses a community, it is common to see others move in.

“That appears to be what happened in Lexington several years ago,” he added.

Robert Buckley, a senior partner in the law firm of Riemer and Braunstein, who represents Patriot Partners, said, “Lexington’s zoning and regulations offer the prospective biotech tenant or owner a very clear picture of what is needed and what the rules will be. Lexington has a biosafety committee that is active in making sure that companies know what the regulations are for the storing and use of hazardous materials.

“Companies going into Lexington know at the start just what is permitted and what is not,” said Buckley.

Stephen Rice, a principal of Patriot Partners, added, “Regulations for biotechnology have not yet materialized in Burlington, and part of our proposal for the Landlocked Parcel is that over the next couple of years, as the process goes forward, those rules and regulations be put in place.

“Typically, when a biotech firm wants to move, it wants to do so quickly,” he said. What is required of them needs to be spelled out beforehand, and the community needs to achieve a clarity of understanding about what is taking place.”