

## BioCT 3/5/19 Legislative Day in Review

Connecticut's bioscience industry has seen tremendous progress in recent years, and its key players say they want to work with lawmakers and other stakeholders to sustain that momentum. Three of the Nutmeg state's success stories in the bioscience sector shared highlights of their growth, and some of their needs, with state and local leaders during BioCT's Legislative Day on March 5 at the state capitol. "It's a chance to meet with our legislators and to hear about what's going on in our industry and the support that we need," BioCT CEO Dawn Hocevar said.

In December, the state unveiled its 10-year Bioscience Strategic Plan, developed by the Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD) and Connecticut Innovations, with input from backers such as the University of Connecticut, Yale University, The Jackson Laboratory and Pfizer. Connecticut's bioscience sector currently employs nearly 39,000 workers in more than 2,500 companies, according to the strategic plan. Every new job in the industry results in an additional 3.9 jobs created. Connecticut ranks fourth in the nation for bioscience patents per 1,000 people.

The plan identifies five key areas where the state and businesses can partner to grow the bioscience sector. Among them are attracting investment capital, increasing business development and recruitment efforts, making needed infrastructure improvements, fostering workforce development initiatives and implementing a coordinated marketing and branding campaign. The administration of Gov. Ned Lamont has formed a Bioscience Working Group to explore ways to implement the plan, with input from legislators on the bipartisan Bioscience Caucus. "This is where it all happens. We get together, share ideas, talk about building business and building workforce and the bioscience industry that's really beginning to bloom in the state," State Sen. Christine Cohen, co-chair of the caucus, said.

Co-chair State Rep. Jonathan Steinberg, chairman of the House Public Health Committee, said the plan presents opportunities for Connecticut to see greater growth in its bioscience industry. "We're at the point where we've created the beginnings of an ecosystem, which will foster more spin-offs and ancillary companies with good-paying jobs from PhDs and MDs right through clinical technicians," Steinberg said. State Sen. Tony Hwang, also a co-chair, said the caucus would likely push for changing the state's capital base tax to spur investment and raise the state caps on research and development tax credits. "There cannot be two more important areas of reaffirming the state's commitment to the bioscience sector," he said.

Legislators and other attendees got to hear success stories from three Connecticut bioscience firms, including Arvinas, a New Haven company that uses targeted protein degradation for the treatment of cancers and other diseases. Chief Financial Officer Sean Cassidy said the company hopes to be treating prostate cancer patients with the technology later this year. Arvinas has grown from 13 people in 2013 to 84 in 2018 and 35,000 square

feet of space, recruiting talent and adding partner investors along the way, including a \$300 million deal with Genentech and an \$800 million deal with Pfizer. “The DECD was very instrumental in terms of getting us up and running,” Cassidy said. The DECD provided \$2.5 million in loan funding for needed infrastructure upgrades and recruitment efforts. Arvinas received a second DECD loan of \$2 million in 2017 to expand, as well as \$3.2 million from Connecticut Innovations. Last September, the company raised \$120 million through an IPO and is in the process of transitioning to a clinical company with 150 employees. The company’s biggest challenge now is finding new lab space. It needs 70,000 square feet, Cassidy said. “We have a renaissance in biotech, but it’s not at a critical mass yet in Connecticut,” he said.

Assembly Biosciences has opened a facility at the BioCT Innovation Commons in Groton. The biopharmaceutical company is developing a new class of oral therapeutics for the treatment of hepatitis B (HBV) infection as well as live biotherapeutic treatments for the human microbiome with an initial focus on gastrointestinal disorders, such as ulcerative colitis. The company is in human clinical studies with the HBV program, and starting human clinical studies with their first live biotherapeutic candidate. “Groton is one of our primary locations for the human microbiome program, where a significant portion of our development and manufacturing activities occur,” Vice President of Drug Product Development Dr. George Grandolfi said. Grandolfi called the former Pfizer building remarkably impressive when Assembly Biosciences considered the location two years ago. “It was a perfect fit for what we needed at the time,” he said. The company has seen steady growth, doubling its lab space in that time and more than doubling office space. It’s also funding renovation projects for a new microbiology lab and renovating basement space to expand operations. The company opened its Groton location with two employees and now has 20, with additional open positions. Looking ahead, the state needs to position itself to attract and retain qualified personnel to Connecticut. “If we grow our business and need 100 scientists, can we find them in Connecticut?” he asked. The state must also prepare companies for life after the incubator. “The BioCT facility in Groton has been ideal for us. We’ve grown our space and our people.” Grandolfi said that with continued vision and support from the state, there would be more success stories in the future.

Founded in 2011, FreeThink Technologies, based in Branford, is a firm that works to accelerate the pace of drug development and approval. UConn’s Technology Innovation Program was instrumental in helping the company launch its lab in Branford, Chief Science Officer Alisa Waterman said. “Finding lab space is one of our most fundamental problems,” she said. The company needed to fund improvements to the facility before it could move in. Since that time, the company’s staff has grown from 15 to 30 people, and it’s outgrown its 6,600 square-foot rental space. Plans are underway to build a new 20,000 square-foot facility in Branford, with an option to double the space, Waterman said. “We’re obviously committed to staying in Connecticut,” she said. One of the challenges the business faces is recruiting key talent. “We need help in terms of being able to recruit and retain people,” she said. “There also needs to be a commitment to developing new and state-of-the-art lab facilities here in Connecticut.”

~ Authored by Ryan Blessing