

## Stepping up courtship of biotech firms

By Rachel Lebeaux, Globe Correspondent | January 17, 2010

Like a growing number of area communities, Franklin is talking about streamlining its regulatory process to attract biotechnology companies, hoping to benefit from the tax revenue and jobs that would accompany their move into town.

The Town Council is considering eliminating a special permit that biotechnology companies must obtain before setting up business operations, a requirement that officials say has been hampering Franklin's ability to attract commercial growth.

"With the economy slow, the town is looking at economic development, and we're trying to do everything possible to get people interested in developing here," said Bryan Taberner, the town's director of planning and community development, who proposed the elimination of the special permit at the council's Jan. 6 meeting.

Town Council members, who are slated to discuss the proposal during their meeting Wednesday, voiced support for the intent behind the initiative, and the projected effect it could have on the town's tax base and employment opportunities.

"It's a very thoughtful and proactive way to do something smart on behalf of the town by attracting quality industries or businesses to it, while still maintaining safety regulations," said Councilor Shannon Zollo.

Over the past decade, the biotechnology industry has exploded across the region. In Framingham, the Cambridge-based [Genzyme Corp.](#) has spent hundreds of millions of dollars to expand its manufacturing and warehouse facilities. Hopkinton boasts a strong presence as well, hosting facilities for Lonza Biologics, [Caliper Life Sciences](#), and [Stryker Corp.](#)

Last year, an English company, Shire Pharmaceuticals Group PLC, transferred many of the operations of its human genetic therapies unit from Cambridge to Lexington, where it is investing \$394 million to expand its campus.

Support is also strong at the state level. Last month, the Massachusetts Life Sciences Center awarded \$25 million in tax incentives to 28 companies statewide, part of a 10-year, \$1 billion initiative to promote the industry's growth.

Across the state, biotechnology employment grew by 42.6 percent between 2001 and 2008, according to Peter Abair, director of economic development at the Massachusetts Biotechnology Council, an industry advocacy group.

In 2008, 46,000 people were working for biotechnology operations in Massachusetts, Abair said, many of them in Boston's western suburbs. While Cambridge remains the area's biotechnology king, many of those more mature companies with operations there are now also seeking cheaper land outside the city for manufacturing facilities, Abair said.

The Mass. Biotechnology Council runs a program aimed at increasing the number of sites around the state that can serve as destinations for its members, and helping municipalities understand how they can attract the industry, Abair said.

“It helps get you in the game, because speed - either to the research bench or to market with a product - is very critical for biotechnology companies,” Abair said.

The council’s BioReady Communities program has signed up 61 municipalities for its ranking system, which Abair said serves as a marketing tool for communities looking to woo companies.

Among area communities, the council has awarded its highest rating, platinum, to Framingham, Lexington, and Waltham. Watertown has been rated a gold community; Marlborough and Norfolk are silver communities; and Franklin, Holliston, and Newton hold bronze ratings.

Franklin could jump up to a gold rating if it follows through with the proposed regulatory changes, Abair said.

Franklin has already taken steps toward welcoming more industry to town. Last year, officials designated three areas as targets for economic growth: Forge Park, the Franklin Industrial Park, and a town-owned parcel on Pond Street adjacent to I-495. Officials are also looking to increase the size of its biotechnology district in and around the Forge Park industrial area, town development director Taberner said.

The town’s special-permit requirement slows the development process and dissuades companies from setting up shop in Franklin, Taberner said.

“This additional special permit is really an additional layer of regulation that other communities don’t have, which appears to be the key reason that companies are looking elsewhere,” Taberner said.

“They can get through the process a lot quicker somewhere else, so they go somewhere else.”

The areas in Franklin slated for biotechnology are also considered priority development sites, requiring officials to make permitting decisions within 180 days. The special permit makes it more difficult to meet this timeline, Taberner said.

Under the suggested changes to the biotechnology use zoning bylaw, the Planning Board, Zoning Board of Appeals, and Board of Health would still be charged with reviewing proposals. Moreover, the proposed regulations would require the Board of Health to hold a public hearing on biotechnology proposals, offering an additional layer of oversight, Taberner said.

Councilor Robert Vallee said that while the bylaw changes would help Franklin catch up with its neighboring communities, they may not go far enough.

“I would welcome legislation that would put us ahead so we could attract biotechnology companies,” Vallee said. ■