

Biotech campus met with doubt

Planners envision research facility as antidote to Kannapolis' job losses

Tim Simmons, Staff Writer

KANNAPOLIS - People like to talk big about the North Carolina Research Campus taking shape in Kannapolis.

Planners say the campus, which is recruiting scientists from Triangle universities, will profoundly change what we know about nutrition. They say it could remake the crops and fortunes of Eastern North Carolina. They say it will prove a region's economy can be resurrected with the right idea.

But before that can happen, they must persuade this decidedly blue-collar town -- an area hit hard by textile and manufacturing layoffs -- to embrace biotech. It has been a tough sell so far.

"I don't think of myself as a researcher," said Tiffany Morrow, who was among 1,200 workers laid off in March from Freightliner. "If that campus is going to offer jobs, I need to see some hard-core proof. I need to see people working there."

About a year into the construction of the 350-acre campus, buildings are taking shape and university labs will begin opening in the spring. Some private businesses, including the software company Red Hat, have also signed on. That means support staff will be needed in less than a year.

But Morrow's comments, a familiar refrain around town, make Kannapolis leaders wonder how long it will take before workers are ready to cut their ties with manufacturing.

Jeanie Moore, vice president of continuing education programs for the local community college, said residents still call the research campus offices wanting to know where the new Pillowtex plant will be. The giant textile mill, known by different names over the years, defined Kannapolis for almost a century before it closed in 2003.

"It's like if you travel a block away from the research campus, it doesn't exist in the hearts and minds of the people," Moore said.

A \$1.5 billion project, the campus is being developed by billionaire David H. Murdock, the owner of Dole Food Co.

Murdock, 84, preaches the value of good nutrition at every opportunity. He plans to spend more than \$1 billion to transform the former mill town into an international magnet for nutrition research. The state has promised almost \$30 million a year, mostly to hire research teams. Local governments could spend more than \$150 million to improve things such as roads and sewers.

Seven of the state's universities will send research teams. A separate development company owned by Murdock is also recruiting private businesses. The campus will be a small town in its own right with housing, retail shopping, a municipal center and other amenities. Thousands of spinoff jobs are predicted.

The first lab, which should be complete this year, looms over the nearby homes of former mill workers. The scope of the construction is jarringly out of proportion with nearby businesses along Dale Earnhardt Boulevard.

Murdock knows it will take time for people to adjust. This is a town where pay is by the hour and billionaires never swoop in to create good jobs.

"When you go from being a lint head in a cotton mill to a community college student where you study things you never dreamed of, it gets confusing for people," he said at a spring ceremony marking construction progress. "But it will sink in."

Given the gap between Murdock's vision and today's realities, that could take some time.

More than 4,800 people lost their jobs when Pillowtexas closed. But in the first quarter of 2006, the most recent period from which state data is available, only 60 percent reported wages. About half of them earned less than \$5,000 during that time.

The March layoffs at Freightliner, about 30 minutes away, has tightened the market. That company is expected to cut at least 1,500 more jobs in July.

Vision catches on

But there are places where the vision is catching on.

At the north campus of Rowan-Cabarrus Community College, a few adults gather around beakers, test tubes and other lab paraphernalia for a Biowork course.

Their backgrounds vary: a laid-off sales representative, a painter, a substitute teacher.

But they take to the class quickly, partly because they were screened to make sure they could handle the required high school math and science.

Dubbed Biotech 101 by the community college, the class is designed to give students a feel for the kind of jobs on the horizon. This is the fourth group to take the course since it was first offered in the summer of 2006. That's partly a reflection of how surprised leaders were to be told by Murdock that he wanted to turn the area into a biotech hub.

"I recall county commissioners discussing economic development in 2003, and biotech came up," Moore said. "But at that time, people didn't think there was a chance -- not even the sliver of a hair of a chance -- that biotech would be a part of Kannapolis."

But that is precisely what is happening in the bright, airy lab of instructor Jody Lublanezki. Near the center of the room, Roy Hanschu and Barbara McKinney make biodiesel fuel from vegetable oil.

Hansch, who was among those laid off from Freightliner, offers a common response when asked why he took the class: "I was tired of moving from job to job to job. I want something that is going to be around for awhile."

Kim Cooper and Susan Blythe quickly agree. They are working nearby on extracting DNA from cells they have taken from inside the linings of their mouths.

The experiments sound harder than they are, which is one of the points Lublanezki wants to impress upon students.

The other point she wants to make is clear that what they are doing -- manipulating organisms -- is the foundation of biotechnology.

It is understood this could be the foundation for new careers.

Ed Otto, dean of the biotechnology programs at Rowan-Cabarrus Community College, gives much the same spiel every day. It is one of his two jobs.

His priority is writing a curriculum from scratch for students who want to earn associate's degrees in biotechnology. Some of the classes will be held in a new 60,000-square-foot building on the research campus.

But barely a day goes by that he isn't speaking to local groups -- civic clubs, chamber gatherings, school assemblies.

"I don't try to sell them on biotech as much as try to educate them," Otto said.

Sometimes, he said, the group gets it. Other times people sort of just stare at him.

He works in a small, spartan cubicle where fluorescent lights hang above partial walls. The building also houses the community college program where students are screened before taking harder classes.

It's called R3, for Refocus, Retrain and Re-employ.

"There is a mystique about biotech that is not deserved," Otto said. "It's not that hard to grasp. Once people see that, Kannapolis will be a whole different place."

But today, Kannapolis is a place where many people face hard choices every day.

Wants vs. needs

At the front of R3, Tammy Layton, 36, explains her options.

She is the kind of worker planners have in mind. Hardworking and enthusiastic, she was an assistant supervisor at Pillowtex and had a good job at Freightliner.

But every company she has worked for has gone out of business or has laid her off.

"I'm just a laborer," she said.

So she came to R3 Center, starting further ahead than most. If things go well, she will be able to work in a pharmacy within six months, she said.

In a general sense, the worlds of a pharmacy and a biotech lab are not that far apart. With 18 more months of study, Layton could earn the degree she needs to work at the new research campus.

The reminders are everywhere. Otto, the man designing the class, works in the R3 building where she takes classes. The campus itself is just across the street.

But Layton has three children, and her husband is also unemployed. She needs a paycheck and benefits now, not in 18 months.

"There is what you want to do and what you need to do," she said.

So maybe she will get one of those new biotech jobs one day. But it won't be soon.

It's just not a part of her plans.

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