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Science lab studies the deadliest diseases

Photos



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An architect's rendering of the completed biosafety lab in Grafton.

By **Jennifer Lord, Daily News staff**
GHS

Posted Sep 27, 2008 @ 11:29 PM

Safety. Security. Science.

These are the words that come the most often from officials at the Cummings School for Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University when they talk about the Level 3 Regional Biosafety Laboratory now under construction on their Grafton campus. The \$31 million facility, one of 13 in a national network, is designed for the study of infectious diseases.

Tufts was awarded \$15 million by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to build the facility, which will contain both Level 2 and Level 3 laboratories. The Level 3 designation allows researchers to study infectious agents that may cause serious or potentially lethal diseases through inhalation.

"You might be wondering why we need this here, at a veterinary school, rather than a medical school," said Dean Deborah Kochevar, DVM, PhD. "In the last 20 years, if you look at the infectious diseases that have emerged, most of them are zoonotic - they have crossed over into humans from animals."

Among those zoonotic infections are SARS, mad cow disease, Lyme disease, and tularemia - a disease which Tufts researcher Sam Telford has been studying in a Level 3 laboratory that already exists on campus.

Grafton, Westborough and Shrewsbury residents - the facility is barely half a mile from the towns' borders - at

first expressed fears that infectious organisms would somehow escape the laboratory. They worried diseases would be stockpiled, that terrorists might target the laboratory and make biological weapons.

Tufts responded by hosting informational sessions about the laboratory and holding monthly tours of the facility as it has risen from a hill on Discovery Drive. Officials talk about "transparency" in their dealings with the public. And the 100 acres adjoining the laboratory, a portion of the former Grafton State Hospital, is under development as Grafton Science Park - 702,000 square feet of development, which will add an estimated 1,600 health sciences jobs and approximately \$2.5 million to the property tax roll when finished.

Defusing fears

Kochevar starts her monthly tour at the construction site by describing the building's security features: iron fencing, a checkpoint before the door, no windows in the laboratories themselves. The building's entrance is bullet-proof glass and designed to be strong enough to withstand explosives.

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She talks about the screening measures designed for personnel: FBI background checks, security clearances and access cards and codes for certain areas of the building. Some on the tour express concerns about terrorism and the possibility of biological weapons being manufactured on site. Kochevar talks about the small amounts of material used for research, explains the protocols used for their handling, and walks the group through the yellow-painted rooms that are now starting to look like laboratories.

"These vaccines, these treatments that people just take for granted now, aren't possible without the research that takes place in these kinds of laboratories," Kochevar said.

The building, however, is ultimately rooted in the fear of terrorism. The NIH considered development of regional biosafety laboratories a priority in the wake of the anthrax mailings that followed the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. As a result, a Level 4 national biocontainment laboratory - designed to study the deadliest of diseases - was approved for Boston University Medical Center and 13 regional facilities with Level 2 and Level 3 labs were approved through a competitive, peer-review process.

It took Tufts three years before it reached the stage where ground was broken for the project, which is expected to be complete by next spring and occupied by June.

"This is not an ivory tower, let's-think-about-research kind of thing," said Joseph McManus, associate dean at the Cummings School. "The NIH wants products. They want vaccines and treatments."

Ultimately, the biosafety lab will improve health rather than endanger it, said McManus, a Westborough resident.

"If we find cures, they are going to be less effective as bioterrorist agents," he added. "We're not talking about vats of toxic chemicals or stockpiling biological weapons. We're talking about tiny quantities of materials. The security is there because we're trying to be prudent. We don't think that we're an attractive target, but the federal government doesn't want to be accused of being lax."

Only 10,000 square feet of the 41,000-square-foot building will actually be used by researchers. The basement, second and third floors are all devoted to the machinery and backup systems that keep the facility running.

The building has a constant flow system, with no air recirculated inside. According to project construction manager Jack McDonald, all of the air inside the building will come from the outside, compared to 10 percent in the average office building. Before the air goes outside, it will be blown through a series of cleaning filters.

"If you examine the air that comes out of the building, it's actually cleaner than it is going through the door," Kochevar said.

The building will also be the final home for insects and animals - mostly rats and mice, but "up to the size of small piglets," Kochevar said.

Once an animal enters the facility, it will be treated humanely, but it will not leave alive. A "biodigester" will chemically break down bodies into a goo that will be processed until it is clean enough to discharge into the Grafton sewer system.

A biotech boom?

The lab will be the first tenant for Grafton Science Park and is seen as the cornerstone to what local officials hope will be a boom in biotechnology growth for the region.

"We're doing this to be a catalyst for research, but also to be a good neighbor and to give some taxes back to the town of Grafton," McManus said. "It's not often that a private university can hand over 100 acres back to the tax roll."

Barbara Clifford, president of the Corridor 9 Chamber of Commerce, said the park's location - close to Rte. 9, just yards away from the Grafton commuter rail stop - should be a driving force in bringing development.

"It's a very strong indicator of the potential for Grafton Science Park," Clifford said. "We look at this as exactly what our region needs at this particular point in time. The opportunities that present themselves - good strong business attracts other strong business, and that means better paying, higher-level jobs for the area."


Shopping areas like the nearby Westborough Commons should also benefit, she added.

"This will have a ripple effect on all the surrounding towns," Clifford said. "People who will be working at this site will be spending money in all our areas. They will be moving here to be closer to the Science Park and the commuter rail is right there - it's smart growth."

Most hospitals, including MetroWest Medical Center and Milford Regional Medical Center, have small Level 3 laboratories on site to diagnose patients with diseases such as tuberculosis and West Nile virus, according to Kochevar.

"The real risk to public health is not having these labs to find these treatments and preventative measures for disease," McManus said.

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