

Ventura BioCenter collaboration allows companies to flourish

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THOUSAND OAKS, Calif. - Since it opened three years ago in Thousand Oaks, the Ventura BioCenter has become home to several startup companies as it works to support life sciences and technology in the area.

Part of the incubator's mission is embodied in the 11,000-square-foot facility, equipped to allow companies to move in and get started quickly. But another factor is how the center brings together different companies that support one another.

It is not unusual for companies within the center to work out arrangements to share their equipment or call upon each other for help with different areas of expertise.

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This synergy helps those with an idea take the leap to test it out, but also helps to nurture success among those companies where the idea has proved valid.

All of these things, said the Ventura BioCenter's leaders, work to encourage companies to start and stay in Ventura County and nearby.

"It's very collaborative," said Greg Cauchon, Ventura BioCenter director. "We've established a nice research community here."

Before the Ventura BioCenter, the kind of space where those things could happen was lacking.

When Cauchon left Thousand Oaks-based Amgen in 2005 to start his company, Designed Polymers, he said he was surprised there wasn't space suited for developing drugs, diagnostics or therapeutics.

He rented some industrial space and fixed it up for his company's needs, but Cauchon said he had to leave those improvements behind when he stopped renting that space.

He saw the need for a facility with the infrastructure in place where companies could rent space for as long as they needed. The drop in real estate prices when the recession hit suddenly made the incubator feasible.

The Ventura BioCenter opened in 2012.

One thing that sets the Ventura BioCenter apart is that it works out lease agreements with tenants for as long as they need — whether for a few months or a couple years.

“We’ve taken flack for it because it’s unconventional,” Cauchon said of the approach. “But if you want to promote startup technology companies, the way you do it is no-fault.”

The flexibility encourages trying out new ideas, while letting people get out quickly if the idea doesn't work, he said.

It also allows companies such as Agoura Hills-based Turf Group to use the BioCenter as the need arises.

Al Brenner, lead scientist for Turf Group, was researching new coatings to reduce the temperature of the fill that goes under artificial turf in athletic fields.

Brenner said he needed some lab space for a few months to do the research, and the Ventura BioCenter was in the right location and had the right lab space for his needs.

He said the Ventura BioCenter supports projects that would not have taken off otherwise. It allows experimentation at low risk.

“If I can go in at a very low cost and determine if it's going to fly ... that's such a benefit,” he said.

Brenner expects he may return to the BioCenter to further some of his own research on the aging process.

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The expectation is that successful companies will be at the incubator for one to two years, said Laura Jones, Ventura BioCenter associate director.

“We kind of consider this the starting nest,” she said. “Eventually, they’re going to fledge the nest.”

That was the case with ADRx, a company focused on finding novel treatments for amyloid diseases — diseases that involve abnormal deposits of protein, such as Alzheimer’s disease and cancer.

The company moved into the Ventura BioCenter in early 2014, growing into about four lab spaces before it moved to its 3,000-square-foot location in Westlake Village about 10 months later.

ADRx is a good example of one of the main goals of the BioCenter, Cauchon said — supporting companies that start in the community and stay in the area.

“It allowed us to cement the ideas together,” said James Treanor, ADRx chief executive officer.

“You have this infrastructure around you,” he said, noting that the company was able to use equipment owned by other companies without having to buy all the equipment at the start.

That relationship continues. Some of the equipment ADRx purchased remains at the BioCenter, and there is still some sharing of equipment, he said.

“The community as a whole of little biotechs has to support each other,” he said.

Treanor called the Ventura BioCenter a “great shot in the arm” for encouraging innovation.

The BioCenter is currently home to 10 companies that fill about 60 percent of the facility.

Some can move in and start work with the bench space, fume hoods and other equipment available at the incubator, while others with more specific needs are expected to bring their own equipment or work out sharing agreements.

As part of building community and providing resources for startups, the BioCenter has held seminars since it moved into the building, with topics ranging from science to biotech law to entrepreneurship.

There have been surprises. The Ventura BioCenter originally started, as its name implies, as an incubator for life sciences companies. But only about half of the companies at the center are life sciences; the other half are focused on other technology. Cauchon and Jones said that has made the environment less competitive and more collaborative. They hope that mix of businesses continues.

“If they have a good idea and are passionate about it, they are going to fit well with our community,” Cauchon said.

Companies interested in renting space in the Ventura BioCenter fill out an application and go through an interview process.

“We kind of have to make a determination if it’s going to be the right fit for here — if we can meet their needs, and they fit in the model for the incubator,” Jones said.

So far, most have been a good fit, though a few, such as e-cigarette companies, have been turned away because their work doesn’t fit with the goals of the incubator.

There is plenty of room to grow. The incubator offers a lot of common space, such as conference rooms and shipping and receiving.

In addition to its flexible arrangements for tenant leases, the BioCenter also makes its two conference rooms available for hourly, half-day or full-day rental.

Plans for the future include growing to fill the building and accommodating as many people and companies as possible, Cauchon said.

“We were the first to articulate a need for a shared technology incubator like this and the first to implement one,” Cauchon said. “I think we’re serving that community. We’d like to think people looking for a tech development space can find us and come here.”

On the Net: <http://venturabiocenter.com/> (<http://venturabiocenter.com/>)

([http://www.vcstar.com/apps?](http://www.vcstar.com/apps?utm_source=utm_campaign%3Dapps_story_embed&utm_medium=utm_medium%3Dstory_embed&utm_campaign=utm_campaign%3Dstory_embeds)

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