

Article from the Star Tribune

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CREDITLINE:

HEADLINE: Editorial: Bioscience / Making the Midway a laboratory

The coming of the personal computer in the 1980s made instant relics of Control Data, Cray and the rest of Minneapolis-St. Paul's once exalted mainframe industry. The region can't allow a similar wind to blow away its native biotech advantages. That's why it's important for leaders in government, academia and private enterprise to launch a cooperative effort to implant a bioscience corridor near the University of Minnesota, with arms stretching to Rochester and wherever else the market leads.

Separate attempts are underway in Minneapolis and St. Paul to develop such a corridor along the university's intercampus transitway. The state has kicked in \$1 million in tax incentives. These are modest beginnings, and more than a bit tardy. San Diego, San Francisco, Seattle, Boston, Baltimore-Washington and Raleigh-Durham, N.C., are miles ahead.

But in three basic biotech areas -- medical devices, and industrial and agricultural applications -- Minnesota still has a chance to cluster the kinds of jobs and prosperity that nearly everyone expects from an industry on the cusp of dramatic advances. Moving discoveries from laboratory to marketplace will require extraordinary collaboration. The university, smaller colleges and major corporate forces like Cargill, Medtronic and the Mayo Clinic are all primary assets, as are emerging companies like Logic Product Development and government partners willing to accommodate a new adventure.

It came as welcome news in May that Minneapolis and the Wall Companies had launched the first of four phases in developing 65 acres to anchor the west end of the corridor. Then on July 10, St. Paul agreed to purchase a large warehouse just off Hwy. 280. The investment, intended as an incubator for infant companies, could eventually expand to 70 acres.

The overall aim is to transform the Midway district from its current industrial decline -- it has lost 2,000 jobs in the last five years -- to a humming engine for research and development, a place where proximity would stimulate professors, researchers and entrepreneurs. The dream, really, is for a new college town to spring up along and north of University Avenue between the Minneapolis and St. Paul campuses. What might seem utopian has already happened in several places (Palo Alto and LaJolla, Calif., Raleigh-Durham, N.C., etc.) and is proceeding in others. The University of California at San Francisco, for example, has bred 60 new biotech companies in five years, helping to take some sting out of the dot-com collapse, and Baltimore plans a new urban village near the Johns Hopkins Medical Center.

St. Paul Mayor Randy Kelly is especially hot on the idea and is attempting to brand it as "the St. Paul Bioscience Corridor." Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak takes a wider view. "The whole city is the incubator," he said, meaning not only his own city but the region, including Rochester. It's important that sibling rivalry not impede what might be Minnesota's most critical project.

A good cooperative model is University UNITED's planning initiative involving one Minneapolis and four St. Paul neighborhoods. "It's not only important what happens here, but how it happens," says the coalition's director, Brian McMahon.

While Minnesota hasn't matched commitments made by Wisconsin, Illinois and many other states, it has going for it the academic and corporate leadership, the potential capital, the skilled workforce, the quality of life and a smart, narrow focus on three bioscience areas. Minnesota is late to this game, but not too late.