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Tradition strives to become global research center

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

The Research Triangle.

San Diego and La Jolla.

Port St. Lucie and Tradition?

The day seems near when the Florida Center for Innovation at Tradition will be mentioned in the same breath with some of the nation's leading research centers for the life sciences.

Government, business and education leaders, along with executives of the first institutions to settle on Tradition as a Florida home, predict thousands of jobs will be created, many of them higher paying scientific and technical positions. Economic development expect millions of dollars to be pumped into the local economy.

"This will be a whole new economy, a huge opportunity," said Paul J. "Pete" Hegener, president of Core Communities, the developers of Tradition. "Within the next four to five years, the entire economy of the Research Coast can change -- pharma, medical devices, research and development centers, office centers, manufacturing -- all tied to bio-research."

Educators say the new scientists and highly trained workers who move here will demand an improvement in the quality of local schools, both to provide for their own children and to supply more young people trained in mathematics and the sciences.

"The impact goes right to the school systems," Hegener said. "You'll see an expansion of universities here, an expansion of doctoral and post-doctoral programs. The community colleges will produce more technicians."

Already set to open in the fall is the new Florida Atlantic University/St. Lucie County Lab School at Tradition. The K-8 public school will offer teaching methods and research linked to FAU faculty and students.

Based on the number of inquiries from biotech firms and manufacturers of medical products which arrive regularly at the office of Larry Pelton, the movement toward a research cluster at Tradition is ramping up.

"In the next six months, we will have more announcements of new companies coming to Tradition," said Pelton, president of the

Economic Development Council of St. Lucie County and a lead recruiter of research institutions and private firms to Tradition. Pelton also lead the effort that brought Scripps Research Institute to Palm Beach County.

"In 10 years, we will be a substantial player in science, medical research and allied technology. In 20 years, this will be a very mature and sophisticated research cluster."

The 1,200 acres along I-95 from Gatlin Boulevard to Becker Road now dedicated to science could expand to 3,600 acres, according to Hegener.

"The entire project will be planned and under construction within 10 years," Hegener predicts. "It will be completed in 20 years. Nothing will stop it."

Pelton says Tradition will grow to the size of La Jolla or the Research Triangle because those centers have more land. Tradition does have is a live-work-play-shop combination that the other research clusters don't. Scientists and allied workers must commute to their California and North Carolina labs.

If they move to Tradition, they can walk or bike to work, or check on a lab experiment at 3 a.m. Hegener predicts that eventually half the Tradition homeowners will also work there.

"It's remarkable to have all this in one location," according to Pelton.

First as Florida's lieutenant governor and now as president of Florida Atlantic University, Frank Brogan says he has seen many Florida developers who just build houses and move on.

"It's easy to be a gypsy in development. (You) put up houses and then bolt like a rabbit," Brogan said. "Pete Hegener is not like that."

"He and Core are building a total quality of life. They're totally wired into the bigger community."

How did a potentially major research cluster grow so quickly next to I-95 in Port St. Lucie? Hegener says the effort to recruit the Scripps Research Institute was the biggest driver.

"We tried to lure them here, but even though we failed to get Scripps and also the Burnham Institute for Medical Research, we learned a lot," Hegener said. "We became knowledgeable on biotech and it became obvious to us that the state was behind it."

The first success, the recruitment of La Jolla-based Torrey Pines Institute for Molecular Studies in late 2006, came after its founder and president, Dr. Richard Houghten, was snubbed by Palm Beach County commissioners when he tried to locate in their county.

Houghten has become as important a recruiter for the Tradition research cluster as any Floridian. He and his wife, Pam, moved to the Treasure Coast with their daughter and made Tradition the headquarters of Torrey Pines. Houghten then started working the

phones to tell his biotech contacts of the welcome reception he had found here.

Houghten's enthusiasm was a major factor in the recruitment of the Oregon Health & Science University's Vaccine and Gene Therapy Institute, known as VGTI, and then the agreement by the Mann Research Center to build a 400,000-square-foot life sciences complex on a 22-acre parcel at Tradition.

"We saw a vision to create a cluster around Torrey Pines," Hegener said. "Now, we're sorting out others, finding out who wants to be here."

Collaboration instead of competition is a key concept among biotech scientists, and they say they have found that same spirit here. Top officials of institutions recruited give praise to local government, business and educational leaders.

"I'm stunned how it came together so fast," Torrey Pines' Houghton said. "The city, county and developer work out any differences in a professional manner. They said they would do it and they did it."

Mann Research Center President John DelRusso calls Tradition "one of the most exciting locations we've seen anywhere in the country," thanks to the commitment that the local community and the state of Florida have already shown to the life sciences sector.

Daniel M. Dorsa, vice president for research at Oregon Health & Science University, concurred.

"I'm totally impressed with the energy of the community here," Dorsa said. "It looked to us like a lot of people rowing in the same direction."

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