

South San Francisco plans job fair in response to biotech industry layoffs

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SOUTH SAN FRANCISCO — More than 1,500 scientists, technicians and research assistants have been laid off from biotech companies in San Mateo County during the last year.

In response, South San Francisco is teaming up with the Economic & Workforce Development agency and the California Applied Biotechnology Center-Bay Area (CalABC) to host a Life Science Career Fair in early March.

"We want to make sure the employment base is here," said Mike Lappen, economic development director. "We're the hub."

The career fair will be held at the South San Francisco Conference Center.

Still in the planning stages, it would link companies to people who have recently been laid off from biotech firms, said Nora Lem, director of CalABC.

"This is about a community helping itself," she said.

Fred Sloan, workforce development manager for San Mateo County's Human Services Agency, said there were more than 500 biotech-related layoffs in San Mateo County before June 2008.

Since then, more than 1,000 people have been dismissed or received early notices.

Many came from South San Francisco's Exelixis, Anesiva and Theravance.

Elan Pharmaceuticals is expected to lay off 53 people later this month, according to the state Employment Development Department.

"They've historically been the strongest economic sectors in our county," Sloan said Friday of the biotech companies.

Sloan blames the national credit crunch for preventing some companies from performing drug trials.

"Biotech takes such significant amounts of funding, and has such long horizons before investments pay off," Sloan said. "(But) inherently, it's an industry that has a lot of risks. They're trying amazing things, and they don't know what will work."

Raya Zion, director of the San Mateo Union Community Alliance, has a different view.

She said companies close or let go of employees because their products are not approved by the Food and Drug Administration.

"It's so very sad to see a lot of talented people and very highly educated people in the Bay Area not working," Zion said. "It's their life and it is very depressing if the talent is sitting and wasting (away)."

Travis Blaschek-Miller, spokesman for BayBio, which tracks the biotech industry, said that even though some companies are laying off people, he expects those employees to be hired by other biotech companies.

He is optimistic that the biotech industry will rebound and said there are approximately 210 medical treatments in the pipeline that should be available to patients in the next five years.

Blaschek-Miller estimates that \$50 billion will be invested in the future to bring medical treatments and cures to patients, resulting in new facilities and new jobs.

That will make life science employees in demand in Northern California, Blaschek-Miller said.

"These people will find jobs," he said. "The life science industry holds massive potential."

How fast people are hired will be based on "how employees are able to adjust to the changing job market and how California supports innovation," Blaschek-Miller added.

Meanwhile, from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Feb. 26 at the South San Francisco Conference Center there will be an "Introduction to Bio-Manufacturing for Non-Professionals" workshop.

Jim DeKloe, a biotechnology manufacturing training professional, will speak on various aspects of the industry.

The event is \$20, and registration is required. For information on the workshop, visit <http://tiny.cc/gTuJj>.