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Newest Bay Area life sciences hub: Burlingame?

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BURLINGAME — The city known more for its hotels, auto dealers and posh downtown shops is trying to become a major player in the life-sciences game.

Burlingame officials have been meeting with their existing biotech and pharmaceutical companies — they were surprised to find they already have 30 mostly small firms — and are striving to attract more, particularly in the Bayfront area.

"It's something that really hasn't been explored in Burlingame and it's probably time to do so," said Councilwoman Ann Keighran, who has been leading the charge along with Councilman Jerry Deal and economic development officials. "Especially when you have a new, state-of-the-art hospital being built in your own town, you try to look at what other services can work with that business."

Keighran was referring to the \$618 million Mills-Peninsula hospital scheduled to open in November at El Camino Real and Trousdale Drive. Research done by BayBio, a Northern California life-sciences advocacy group, shows that biotech companies in the Burlingame area currently work closest with researchers at Stanford University and UC San Francisco.

The centerpiece of the Burlingame movement would be a potential life-sciences campus at a vacant former drive-in theater on the Bayfront. Millennium Partners, a San Francisco-based developer, in the spring submitted a proposal for a 700,000-square-foot project at Beach Road and Airport Boulevard. The proposal, which depending on the market could turn into a general office park, will be studied for at least a year, Planning Manager Maureen Brooks said.

So why would a company choose Burlingame instead of another city in the Bay Area?

"It likely comes down to pricing," said Travis Blaschek-Miller, communications director for BayBio. "Anywhere in the Bay Area, you have access to top talent."

In the northern Peninsula — from Brisbane to Burlingame — life-science office space costs \$2.78 per square foot on average, which along with San Francisco is the highest in the Bay Area, according to a BayBio real estate survey. The Bay Area average is \$2.22 per square foot.

But the price might be justifiable. In the same survey, life-sciences companies gave the northern Peninsula the best overall marks in the Bay Area. The "biggest gripes" the companies cited were lack of government support, incentives to move there and business services.

Burlingame officials have been asking biotech companies what they need to stay here, and already they have started hooking up companies with one another.

"They need to know that other people are there," Deal said. "They need to communicate with each other so they can use each others' assets."

Burlingame biotech companies told officials their biggest problems with the area were the lack of public transit from the nearby Millbrae BART-Caltrain station and the excess amount of moving-company trucks that park on their streets, Deal said.

"There is one truck down there that has graffiti all over it that has been there for weeks," Deal said, adding that they sometimes block signs or entrances to buildings. "And they're not working in Burlingame."

Although they are working on both those issues, Deal said one of the biggest changes will be to simply thrust Burlingame into the spotlight within the industry.

For instance, BayBio held its annual conference at a Burlingame hotel in April after South San Francisco hosted it the previous two years.

"There wasn't even a representative from Burlingame there," Deal said. "That's going to change next time."

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