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Upcoming Mid-Atlantic Bio conference a boon for area firms

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By now, Maryland's bioscience companies should be accustomed to traveling for networking opportunities.

At industry conferences like the annual meeting sponsored by BIO, the **Biotechnology Industry Organization**, companies get the chance to network with each other, with academics from whom they could license technology for further development, and with venture capitalists who could offer the boon of further funding for their expensive projects.

But that meeting, which this year hosted nearly 20,000 attendees, always is a trek for Maryland companies — last year in Philadelphia, this year in Chicago, next year in Boston.

It's not that the travel itself is such a burden, say proponents of Maryland's 350-company-strong life sciences industry.

But investors looking to invest or companies looking to relocate can't get a real feel for the industry unless they're here, watching its chemistry and seeing its strengths firsthand.

That's where **Mid-Atlantic Bio** steps in.

The regional conference began last year in Washington as a showcase for companies, academics and potential investors from Maryland and Virginia designed specifically to bring industry players to the region to see it with their own eyes.

This year it runs from Tuesday, Oct. 10, through Wednesday, Oct. 11.

"What we're really trying to do is position this as the annual meeting for the bioscience community in the mid-Atlantic," said C. Robert Eaton, president of **MdBio**, the life sciences arm of the membership organization the **Tech Council of Maryland Inc.**

And it's not just for companies, he added.

"It is a meeting where the federal labs, the universities, the investment community all come together at one time in one place, whether it's to catch up on people they don't see very often or whether it's to pick up new ideas from some of

the sessions," according to Eaton.

MdBio is one of the organizations sponsoring the conference, along with the **Mid-Atlantic Venture Association**, or MAVA, and the **Virginia Biotechnology Association**, known as VaBIO, a 200-member nonprofit representing the needs of the state's nearly 160 bioscience firms.

Last year, the event drew more than 750 industry professionals to the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center in Washington.

Part of the aim is to create a regional presence for the bioscience communities of Maryland and Virginia, said Julia Spicer, executive director of MAVA, which represents a membership of 500 regional VC professionals with more than \$10 billion in capital under management between them.

"Some of the first steps" in drawing capital and new businesses to the region, Spicer explained, "are having a very good business community and environment for growing and building companies. We have a very good case of that in the mid-Atlantic."

There are the federal laboratories, academic labs, federal funding institutions like the **National Institutes of Health**, federal regulatory agencies like the **Food and Drug Administration**, she cited — and a community that is growing in two neighboring states, Virginia and Maryland.

Management of companies looking to relocate or venture capitalists looking to invest "don't much care if the company is in Maryland or Virginia," said Eaton, which is why selling a regional approach is so key.

"We do think more broadly about community," Spicer said. "That makes for what we call a good cluster industry."

Building a strong biotechnology cluster has been one of the main goals of Maryland Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. and his **Department of Business and Economic Development**, led by Secretary Aris Melissaratos.

The approach is necessary to drive the increase in venture investment Maryland's biotechs are craving, Spicer said.

That is why the conference is giving 16 biotechs from regional states Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina and Pennsylvania the opportunity to present their technologies and business plans to the venture firms and other industry players in attendance.

Those 16 companies, with Maryland firms including **MaxCyte Inc.** of Gaithersburg, **Traxion Therapeutics Inc.** of Baltimore and **Lentigen Corp.**, also of Baltimore, were subjected to a selection process during which a committee of experts reviewed their technologies and plans.

Among the presenters last year was Annapolis-based **PharmAthene Inc.**, the winner last month of a **Department of Defense** contract that could be worth as much as \$213 million.

Melissaratos praised the conference for giving the companies a chance to sell themselves to investors, and as a sort of practice run for the BIO conference in the spring — but added, attracting investment isn't necessarily as difficult as the firms claim.

"It's never enough for them," he said of the Maryland firms' complaints about the investment climate. "I always turn it around on them and say, 'You've got to earn it first. You've got to have the scientific background to attract money. You'll get enough money if you perform well.'"

A regional approach also can be beneficial, he added — but that can start within the state of Maryland.

"We need to attempt to bring the Baltimore area and the Montgomery County region together," Melissaratos urged. "Once you achieve that, you go regional."

The movement to unify the bioscience industry's two geographic factions — the I-270 corridor that includes Montgomery County, and its counterpart to the east, the Baltimore City and Baltimore County area — with their diverse wants and needs has made headway of late, the secretary noted.

A particularly good sign, he said, was the February merger of MdBio, once a non-member-ship nonprofit, and the Tech Council of Maryland.

The two groups had been warring factions for a time, with their disputes including a scuffle last year over MdBio's failed bid to convert to a membership organization.

"It's very helpful when you have a larger industry voice," Melissaratos explained.

And bringing outsiders to the Washington area for Mid-Atlantic Bio is a valuable move, he added. "It's always good to do it close to home."

Last year's conference, the fruit of nearly two years' worth of preparation, was a strong start, said Eaton. "It surpassed everybody's expectations."

This year's event features prestigious keynote

speakers including David P. Holveck, president of **Johnson & Johnson Development** Corp., and Anthony S. Fauci, director of the NIH's **National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases**, and roundtable discussions on specific topics such as "The Aging Brain" and advances in the science immunology.

Its organizers hope it offers something for everyone and is a step in the right direction, Spicer said.

"Rome wasn't built in a day," she said. "What we've been able to do for the last three years is build upon all the hard work that's already been occurring for many years prior."

Eaton has a simple goal for the conference.

"We want this to be the one meeting of the year that everybody has on their calendar — the main event," he added.

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