

Downtown site continues to draw despite economy

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Skokie's downtown Illinois Science + Technology Park has not been immune to the crippling economy of the past year or so, but it also has taken nowhere close to a critical hit.

In fact, you might say things are looking up at the park, which still has available space for life science companies such as biopharmaceuticals, medical and diagnostic devices, diagnostic substances and hospitals and laboratories.

In addition to recently acquiring Vetter Pharma International, the Science Park's second largest international company, the facility will also benefit from a new downtown Skokie Swift station being built only a short distance away. Construction on the station is scheduled to begin next month and end in the fall of 2011.



A viable mode of public transportation to and from the park is beneficial not only to existing employees but also to prospective park tenants considering leasing space, officials say.

Vetter Pharma International, a German-based leading provider of aseptic pre-filled drug-delivery systems, makes sure that its work is performed without any compromise and in a completely sterile environment. In this photograph taken in Germany, an employee takes drug samples in a sterile manufacturing area. (Photo courtesy of Vetter)

The park, along with Vetter Pharma International and the village of Skokie, were well represented at last week's 2010 BIO International Convention at Chicago's McCormick Place. The Illinois Science + Technology Park has come a long way since the convention was last held in Chicago four years ago. Even in such a dire economic climate, the park can boast that it now employs well over 900 people, not far off from when Pfizer and Searle, the last park owners, were at their peak.

Vetter and Astellas Research Institute are the only two international companies at the park. But when Astellas first came to Skokie, it had considerably less space and expanded over time.

Forest City Senior Vice-President of New Business Development Michael Rosen expects the same thing to happen with Vetter.

Northshore University HealthSystem remains the largest park tenant occupying about 200,000 square feet. Nanolnk, Inc., an emerging growth technology company specializing in nanometer-scale manufacturing and applications development for the life science and semiconductor industries, also occupies about 25,000 square feet at the park. It is one of five nano-technology companies in Skokie.

Forest City Science + Technology Group acquired the science park property in March, 2005. In its first 18 months or so, the park developed a master plan, which called for knocking down nine of the existing buildings. Perhaps the most radical master plan elements were turning the property from an enclosed set of buildings into an open cutting-edge life sciences campus.

"The nine buildings that we knocked down had either no historic value or no functional value," Rosen said.

Four of the original buildings remain -- three of them in renovated form -- and the plan calls for building more as the market demands.

The park's three main buildings are about 65 percent filled, Rosen said. The one building without renovation work has only one tenant. He said that the park is expecting another major European company to land there shortly.

The Science Park then is seeing development success through the worst of economic times.

"What happens in these kinds of things is that once you begin to get this kind of critical mass and you've got all these companies here, people want to be here," Rosen said.

The park has plans for a new building of 200,000 square feet, but the economy is likely to keep expansion on hold for awhile.

"You used to be able to start a new building and go out and get a construction loan if you could show you had a tenant for 30 percent of the building," Rosen said. "You'd build a building and the rest would be expected. Today with the financial markets having changed substantially, it's probably a level of 70 or 75 percent that you need."

In other words, the science park now finds itself having to have tenant occupancy for 150,000 square feet of its new building before construction plans can really get off the ground.

The park's master plan calls for constructing a maximum of five new buildings over time, which would add another 1.3 million square feet to the campus. That would be in addition to the existing four buildings occupying 680,000 square feet.

Park planners originally said that it would expect the campus to be built out in 10 to 15 years, but that was before the economy tanked. Rosen said that the economy has probably thrown the park a year or two off its long-term schedule.

But in weighing the success of the science park, it's not hard to find significant progress -- brutal economy notwithstanding.

"The important milestone for me is that four years ago, the Bio conference was held here in Chicago just like now," Rosen said. "Four years ago, we had maybe 100 people here and two companies. Today we are just under a thousand and 19 companies. So for a four-year period of time, that's pretty good."