

UH business incubator space fills lab, office needs

By Ileana Najarro | August 30, 2016 | Updated: August 30, 2016 10:50pm

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Photo: Michael Ciaglo, Staff

IMAGE 1 OF 7

"It's the combination of academia and the industry," Colleen O'Connor says of UH's new wet lab business incubator. O'Connor is founder and CEO of CAVU Biotherapies.

Alberto Goenaga recalls the struggle finding suitable workspace in Houston for his startup, Dexmat, which produces fibers and films out of carbon nanotubes that can conduct electricity like metal but behave and feel like a plastic. He found office space aplenty, but he couldn't bring chemicals inside. He also found empty car shops that could be retrofitted but wouldn't be ideal for business meetings.

"It was one or the other," he said.

By Nov. 1, Dexmat will move into its new home at the University of Houston's new wet lab business incubator in the school's Energy Research Park.

The \$14 million, 13,000-square-foot project complements the existing year-old innovation center and will host an open house on Thursday. It features more than 250 lab benches, fume hoods, explosion-proof containers and refrigerated storage as well as meeting rooms, office space and more.

"An incubator can be a Starbucks," said Ken Jones, director of the Wolff Center for Entrepreneurship. But the utilities in this lab, he added, are "unprecedented."

Startups, affiliated with the university or otherwise, will be able to rent space on a monthly basis. Companies working within the nanotechnology, medical and energy fields are the most likely to use the new space and there's already been interest from startups from around the world, Jones said. Precautions will be taken to ensure there's no conflict between companies working on chemical projects that may have adverse effects on others, he said.



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Colleen O'Connor, founder and CEO of Houston-based CAVU Biotherapies, called the space a godsend.

"It's timely because it's much needed," said O'Connor, who will move into the lab later this year.

O'Connor's startup works to eradicate cancer in dogs through a form of immunotherapy with the hope that the findings will help in the broader fight against cancer in humans. Dogs are often diagnosed with similar types of cancer as their human counterparts.

Though her company already has federal and state approval to move forward with commercialization, she needed proper lab space to better assess and treat blood samples that can be sent to veterinary oncologists.

It's not just the space that's attractive.

Startups housed in the incubator will have access to workshops and training from the university's division of research and can hire students as interns and collaborate with faculty.

"It's the combination of academia and the industry," O'Connor said.

The university's support for entrepreneurial startups based in its Energy Research Park has seen success with companies like Wavve Stream, a project that grew out of a UH faculty member's research.

The startup, which makes gel out of shrimp shells that filtrate water, has won numerous grants and competitions. Once it gains enough seed funding by December, it plans to move into the new lab space.

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What: Open house tour of the University of Houston's new wet lab business incubator

Where: Energy Research Park at 5000 Gulf Freeway, Building 4

When: Thursday, 5:30 p.m.

Admission: Free at eventbrite.com/e/uhs-innovation-center-labs-grand-opening-tickets-26725190765

Co-founder and CEO Eric Beydoun said the innovationlab demonstrates UH's dedication to the growth of startups in Houston.

"They're not in it to make money," he said. "They're in it to see our vision through."

Beydoun said Wavve is in the middle of what he calls "the valley of death," moving beyond testing the gel to marketing it as a commercial product.

The space is suited for companies like Wavve and Dexmat that are working on securing manufacturing plans. Goenaga of Dexmat said the space will ultimately benefit Houston as new companies in major fields are created here.

"What the Energy Research Park offers is more than a lab but less than a full manufacturing facility," he said.

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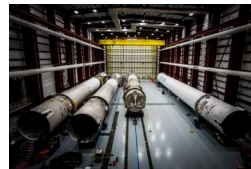
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