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Groundbreaking for New UTHSC Regional Biocontainment Lab Signals Movement — At Last

BY KAREN OTT MAYER

March witnessed a major move in the ongoing process of creating the UT-Baptist Research Park in midtown Memphis – a groundbreaking ceremony for the UTHSC Regional Biocontainment Laboratory (RBL).

The ceremony came four years after UTHSC was awarded funding, which resulted in the RBL being the first construction project at the site.

"We had the cash in hand. We had to have the approvals of NIH before we could start construction," said RBL director Gerald Byrne, PhD.

On March 9, officials from UTHSC, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), and Memphis Bioworks Foundation gathered at the corner of Madison and Dudley to dedicate the site where the original Baptist Memorial Hospital had been located. Some of the speakers included Dr. William F. Owen Jr., vice president for health affairs and chancellor at UTHSC; Dr. Michael G. Kurilla, PhD, director of the NIAID's Office of Biodefense Product Development; Steve Bares, PhD, president and executive director of the Memphis Bioworks Foundation; and Byrne.

"We really enthused about the possibilities. Right now, we're reaching out to the community at every level and helping Memphis understand what we're all about," said Byrne.

The RBL has an expected completion date in 2008. UT continues to engage in functional and active research in an existing facility while awaiting completion of the new RBL.

UTHSC was awarded nearly \$18 million in federal funding from the NIAID to be used for the construction of the RBL, which is part of the 1.4 million square foot medical center that will be dedicated to furthering research, education and biotech business in Memphis.

Memphis business leaders expect the park to bolster the local economy by providing jobs to local citizens and by attracting nationally renowned faculty and industry to the area.

Byrne believes that Memphis was chosen as one of the 13 funded sites because of two reasons. "We have historically been strong in the infectious disease area and I think they have been impressed by the work we've done in creating strains with unique features using mice," he said. "Also, our researchers are great on the software development side, too."

The primary purpose of the RBL will be to conduct research with the goal of developing new drugs, vaccines, and diagnostics to protect the general population from infectious diseases and bioterrorism. As one of only 13 facilities funded by the NIAID in the country, the UTHSC RBL will conduct research requiring Biosafety Level-3 (BSL-3) containment as defined by the Centers for Disease Control. BSL-3 facilities are designed specifically for this type of research. Scientists will study multidrug resistant tuberculosis, tularemia, streptococci, cholera, and chlamydia infections.

When finished, the two-story RBL building will measure approximately 30,000 square feet, with 11,000 square



Gerry Byrne, PhD, director of the UTHSC Regional Biocontainment Laboratory, speaking at the March 9 groundbreaking.

feet of actual working space. Byrne explained that certain air handling specifications dictated the design.

The entire first floor is designated a contained area. The new facility will consist of six laboratories and a special feature area for mice. "UT has long been known for its mice research and it has become a niche research area for UT," said Byrne.

Byrne added that UT researchers are dedicated to pursuing advances in emerging infectious diseases, novel antibiotics and drug discovery. The facility will have a robotic device for novel antibiotics and an aerobiology suite with specialized equipment.

The RBL will serve as a national resource in the event of a bioterrorism or infectious disease emergency. An RBL must be ready to provide facilities and scientific support to first-line responders and to support public health efforts in the event of a national emergency. Despite the fact that the facility will be studying some of the most drug-resistant or contagious diseases, a properly constructed and operated BSL-3 facility poses no threat to the local community and there are no recorded incidents of community contamination resulting from research conducted at these facilities.

On the design itself, UT worked hand-in-hand with NIH and architects. On the staffing side, Byrne expects to see additional faculty hires to support the self-sustaining entity. "I see this new facility filling a need by providing a service to other investigators who are not on campus," said Byrne.

The new site is one of several NIH Regional Centers of Excellence and an affiliate of the Southeast region.