Bio Nebraska building momentum for the state’s bio sciences sector

by Becky McCarville

While Bio Nebraska’s Executive Director Rob Owen is new to his current role, he isn’t new to the bio/life sciences sector in Nebraska. As former board chairman for Bio Nebraska, previous in-house counsel for Streck and of counsel at Pontiac, Michigan-based The Dobrusin Law Firm, Streck’s outside intellectual property law firm, he’s well-versed in Bio Nebraska’s mission to promote the state’s biotech industry and is focused on conversations with the 80 plus member companies want.

Established in 2005, the organization is building momentum based on its “three pillars,” formulated about eight years ago by former Executive Director Phil Kozers (who left Bio Nebraska for MatMacorp this past Fall) and Owen, when he was board chairman.

“Through some meetings with stakeholders we tried to find out — what can Bio Nebraska offer its members and what do our members want, most importantly,” Owen said, adding that with less than two full-time employees, the organization is limited in what it can offer. Assistant Director Sasha Forsew was hired part-time last April.

The organization’s three pillars include advocating for its members through issue advocacy, coordinating networking events and being a “go-to” resource in and out of the state, helping make connections.

“As a result of that, we got our [financial] feet — we flipped the model from being 75% funded out of the university and now we’re 75% industry/private sector versus university,” he said.

Revenue streams from membership dues, corporate sponsorships and a portion from a lab site purchase program for members.

“As a result of getting our footings and knowing what we could offer and what our members wanted, we’ve figured out that we can now be proactive in some areas [like the] women in STEM initiative that we started about three years ago,” he said.

This initiative has grown from a luncheon that included women from the STEM sector (not just bio) three years ago to now, “an overwhelming response” from members who want networking opportunities with other women, mentorship and professional growth opportunities.

In October, a women in STEM luncheon drew over 120 attendees with speakers Shonna Streck, CEO of Streck; Heartland Business Journal editor beware; and Nebraska Medical Center’s pharmacy school if she hadn’t known about some of the opportunities available in Nebraska.

Madsen said that nanomedicine is a big area of research on campus. The university upgraded its nanomedicine lab space about a year ago. “There have been at least three others we’ve hired right out of school,” he said. “[Bio Nebraska] really fosters that whole infrastructure of biotechnology.”

Madsen, who was hired as entrepreneur in residence by UNeMed in 2012 and moved to Nebraska from Madison, Wisconsin, said he can speak to the power of a strong biotech trade association after witnessing successes in Wisconsin.

“Out of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, they’ve sprouted hundreds of biotech companies — it’s just incredible,” he said. “They’ve got a lot of funding there and a lot of people who will invest in bio tech. And, they’ve had several big buyouts of companies.”

Bio Nebraska has grown since Madsen first came to Nebraska.

“I think the organization has really accomplished a lot both in terms of membership, bringing people together — the camaraderie, if you will — getting the government attention, and it especially in an industry that’s showing big buyouts of companies,” he said. “There have been a lot of big steps over that time.”

ProTransit Nanotherapy, which has been developing a skin care lotion that prevents skin cancer, is scaling up its patented nanoparticle production in lab space it rents at UNMC and has been a beneficiary of state grants for Phase 0, Phase 1 and Phase 2 of its research.

ProTransit Nanotherapy delivers high-powered antioxidant enzymes that can prevent UV skin damage that leads to photocarcinoma, skin cancer, among other potential applications.

The company is currently working on submitting three more grants to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) this month — for the reduction of hypertension, one for treatment of traumatic brain injury and the third for its product to prevent skin cancer.

The issue advocacy work by Bio Nebraska draws lawmakers’ attention to Nebraska’s bio-tech sector.

The biggest “win” over the years was the passage of LB641 — the Bio Sciences Innovation Fund — that provides targeted investment and resources in bio science startups. Startup companies can apply for grants — funding “that didn’t exist before,” Owen said.

The biggest topic coming up this year in the legislative session, he said, is the industry-wide Nebraska Advantage Act, a tax incentive that is expiring. The legislature started working on a replacement bill last year, but it was held up by a property tax issue.

Bio Nebraska wants to ensure that the state’s biotech sector, along with others, is eligible for tax incentives for capital investments, even if it only creates five or six high growth, high paying jobs.

“If Nebraska’s going to have this program, let’s make sure that all industries are eligible for...
Reprinted with permission from the publisher of MBJ Inc.
This permission is for photo and article reproduction or placement on your Web site. Under no circumstances, because of spamming and other issues, will permission be granted to transmit our stories by e-mail.