

RICHARD A. DIMINO AND STEPHANIE POLLACK

The Boston Globe

On life sciences, keep moving

By Richard A. Dimino and Stephanie Pollack | November 8, 2007

OTHER THAN our sports teams, few of Massachusetts' assets attract more envy or interest than our life sciences cluster. Competitor regions across the United States are investing hundreds of millions, even billions, of taxpayer dollars to nurture or create their own life sciences clusters. So how can the Commonwealth maintain and build on our lead in this important competition?

Much of the public discussion has focused on business incentives and workforce development measures. Yet fostering the life sciences in Massachusetts also depends on a more nuts-and-bolts issue: making sure people in this industry can get to work and get around easily.

Boston and Cambridge are home to some of the world's leading research universities and teaching hospitals. These "eds and meds" provide nearly 150,000 jobs in higher education, healthcare delivery, and the life sciences. These institutions also anchor a thriving cluster of biotechnology, pharmaceutical, medical device, and life sciences companies. Life science employment alone accounts for more than 42,000 jobs in Greater Boston, and is expected to double by 2010.

A study released recently by A Better City found that one major advantage of our life sciences cluster is its geographic compactness. This proximity leads to productive interactions among university and hospital researchers, physicians, and industry. Even in the Internet age, face-to-face communication is vital to innovation. Our tight-knit web of institutions and companies allows a physician-researcher to see patients at a hospital, teach at a university, attend a seminar, and work in a laboratory - sometimes all in one day.

But something else occurs when you have a thriving, geographically concentrated sector generating thousands of daily trips between university labs, classrooms, hospitals and companies: congestion. The Massachusetts Life Sciences Collaborative reports that 83 percent of respondents to a recent survey find it difficult to get to work, and a 2001 Jones Lang LaSalle survey showed that over 75 percent of knowledge-based technology companies consider access to public transportation a key factor in evaluating sites.

Our congestion problem is a sleeping giant that threatens to inhibit future growth. So improving our infrastructure - especially public transit - should be an important component of the Commonwealth's life sciences economic development strategy.

The state's Transportation Finance Commission has clearly outlined the financial obstacles challenges to merely maintaining our existing roadway and transit network. Yet, while tackling our financial woes, how can we afford not to strategically invest in infrastructure projects that support economic growth?

Competitors such as San Francisco and Seattle have invested more than \$750 million combined on recently opened light rail systems that provide connectivity for their life sciences institutions and regional workforces. Transportation is too often overlooked in the economic development toolbox and ought to be prioritized in combination with other tools that stimulate growth.

Another advantage we have over our competitors is that, while other regions are spread thin trying to invest simultaneously in bricks-and-mortar laboratories, research and development, and transportation infrastructure, here in the Commonwealth, private dollars are paying for many of these same investments.

The current multibillion dollar life sciences building boom in Massachusetts is financed almost exclusively by universities, teaching hospitals, and life sciences companies. Similarly, our university and hospital laboratories are unparalleled in their ability to attract more than \$1 billion annually in federal research funding.

The Commonwealth therefore has the luxury of being able to focus public investments more strategically. Massachusetts can leverage federal, institutional, and private-sector funding and focus taxpayer dollars on areas that need it most. Transportation is one area where funds are badly needed.

The life sciences stimulus legislation under review on Beacon Hill includes critically important initiatives that spur growth and development in the Commonwealth. And while business incentives, select capital improvements, gap research funding, and workforce development should all be considered as important components of the pending legislation, strategic transportation investments should also be included.

And there's an additional benefit to investing in transportation: all communities, workers and employers benefit from better roads and transit. One of the best investments Massachusetts can make in its "innovation infrastructure" is improving transportation and transit connections.

Richard A. Dimino is president of A Better City. **Stephanie Pollack** is a senior research associate at the Northeastern University Center for Urban & Regional Policy. ■

© [Copyright](#) 2007 The New York Times Company