



Taking Stock: The Animal Health Corridor Is Moving Forward

Laura Ziegler (2009-11-18)

KANSAS CITY (kcur) - If you feed your dog Science Diet, or protect him with the flea and tick control Advantix, you're using products made in the Animal Health Corridor.

The Corridor is an official area, recognized by an act of Congress, between Kansas City, Manhattan, and Columbia. Over 200 animal health and related companies are located in the region, and they're responsible for almost a third of the sales in the 19 billion dollar industry.

This may seem an unlikely place to begin. But keep listening. The American Royal turns 110 this year. It began as a Hereford Show under a tent in the Kansas City Stockyards. Today, the livestock show attracts thousands of owners, breeders, and agricultural businesses. The Royal, now a business itself, says a quarter million people come to its events each fall.

Cowgirl

And this is one of them. Chelsa Crouch leans a cowboy boot up against the fence and cheers for her husband Casey a professional cowboy on their horse, The Earl of Playboy. Even if the American Royal is more professional today, it still represents our agricultural roots, says Harry Cleberg, a retired farmer and farm industry executive. And the Animal Health Corridor? He says it's a direct descendant of the Royal.

Cleberg: "Purebred breeders would bring animals in. They'd select animals to improve the genetics of the particular breeds. It was basically animal genetics of 110 years ago, quite different than embryo transplants of today."

Sound Outside

If the American Royal represents animal science of the past, today's groundbreaking on a windy plot of land adjacent to the strip malls and subdivisions of western Olathe represents its future.

Wearing purple hardhats for the K-State Wildcats, the president of K-State, elected officials, and business leaders, grab shiny new shovels and turn over some soil. They're initiating work on the National Animal Health and Food Safety Institute, the first brick and mortar of the Olathe Innovation Campus, an extension of K-State. It's a flagship of the Animal Health Corridor.

The Campus is funded in part by a 1/8 cent sales tax Johnson County voters approved last year, and in part by the Kansas Bioscience Authority. That's a 581 million dollar public-private initiative the Kansas legislature enacted in 2004. The city of Olathe donated 90 acres of land. Dan Richardson, CEO of the Olathe Campus, says bringing the top-notch, K-State scientists closer to the commercial center of animal health will attract more

researchers, companies, and ultimately more jobs. In fact, officials project an additional 3000 jobs over the next 10-15 years.

Richardson: "It is truly an economic boon. People are going to want to know what is going on here and be part of it."

That's where Bayer Animal Health comes in. Bayer was one of the charter members of the Corridor. As we amble down the quiet company halls lined with photos of employees and their pets, spokesman Bob Walker says the Animal Health Corridor is an opportunity to expand, and attract talent

Walker: "To form strategic partnerships for product manufacturing, and to solidify our relationships with vet schools, K-State and University of Missouri. The Corridor has allowed us to do that."

The launch of the Corridor has not been without bumps. Just last month, Pfizer announced it would move its subsidiary Fort Dodge Animal Health from Overland Park to its headquarters in Madison, New Jersey, possibly taking 200 jobs with it.

Officials with the Kansas Bioscience Authority took some flack for committing 50 million dollars to 8 venture capital firms without the promise those firms would invest in Kansas.

And the jewel of the Animal Health Corridor, the National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility, a 600 million dollar high-security laboratory awarded to K-State, has been put on hold while Congress investigates its safety.

DeHaven: "I call it 'press release economics.'"

When Tad DeHaven was with the Indiana Governor's office he saw a number of these ambitious public-private partnerships fail. Now, as an economic analyst for the conservative Cato Institute, he warns the projects often put taxpayers at risk.

DeHaven: "The business community gets free money. If it pans out they make money. If not, the burden falls to taxpayers. For elected officials, it's a wonderful opportunity to have ribbon cuttings. That way they can say to their voters they are doing something. That's why I call it 'press release economics.'"

Regardless of its critics, the creative breadth of the Animal Health Corridor has inspired hope, not only as economic development, but also because much of the research could apply to humans as well as animals. The Corridor also represents a collective effort to celebrate the region's agrarian past, as well as create economic security that will carry it well into the future.



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