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Stem cell summit in Detroit? Proposal 2, TechTown labs among selling points

By Tom Henderson

It's likely the 2010 World Stem Cell Summit will be held next October in Detroit, with more than 1,200 scientists, researchers, government officials and representatives of private industry from more than 25 countries in attendance.

This year's three-day summit, the fifth annual, begins today in Baltimore, in conjunction with Johns Hopkins University.

"It's not set in stone, yet, but Detroit is strongly under consideration," said Bernie Siegel, executive director of the Florida-based Genetics Policy Institute, the nonprofit organization that puts on the summit. The conference is tentatively set for the first week in October.

"There are a lot of strong reasons to bring the summit to Michigan, not the least of which is the passage of the stem cell proposal last year," said Siegel, referring to Proposal 2, which allowed stem cell research in Michigan.

Siegel said the official announcement will be made soon after this week's summit, following a vote of the institute's board.

Siegel said another reason to come would be TechTown's proposed stem cell commercialization center, a 15,000-square-foot collection of wet labs. Construction is expected to start late this year and be completed by the end of June, according to Randal Charlton, TechTown's executive director.

Siegel visited Michigan Aug. 19-20. His agenda the first day included a tour of TechTown and meetings at the governor's office in Detroit, with Wayne County's chief development officer, Turkia Mullin, and with officials of the Detroit Marriott Renaissance Center. The second day he met in Ann Arbor with University of Michigan stem-cell researchers and in East Lansing with Michigan State University researchers.

"There's certainly enough academic resources in the state to make it a center for regenerative medicine," he said.

The TechTown commercialization center was announced last February by Wayne County Executive Robert Ficano in his state-of-the-county address. The county provided the first \$750,000 for construction. It will be available to university researchers around the state and to for-profit biotech startups.

The rest of the build-out will be financed by a \$4.1 million award from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, \$2 million of which is a grant and the rest a loan.

"The award was confirmed by phone about two weeks ago," said Charlton, who said that the money will complete the build-out of TechTown's Tech One building on Burroughs.

"To have a commercialization center for regenerative medicine is a very unique thing. I haven't seen anything like it in the

U.S. Commercializing the research is a very important thing,” said Siegel. “Regenerative medicine is the future. It's a game-changer. This is the beginning of regenerative-medicine age.”

Although the decision to come to Detroit isn't official, TechTown officials are optimistic.

“This is a big deal. In the past, Detroit has not been a national venue for nonautomotive or nonengineering conferences,” said Charlton. He credited Gov. Jennifer Granholm's office, the Michigan Economic Development Corp., Wayne County, the Detroit Regional Chamber and the Detroit Economic Growth Corp. for “putting the package together to attract this international conference.”

He said that Wayne State, UM, MSU and TechTown will be sponsors.

“The summit is a very big deal,” said Azzam Elder, deputy Wayne County executive. “Our goal is to become a magnet when people think of the commercialization of anything related to stem cells.”

When asked if he, like some officials at TechTown, consider the summit a done deal, Elder said: “I'm hesitant to say it's a done deal. We are in a great position to make this happen. There are a couple of things to tighten up. I'm a little bit superstitious. It's not done until it's done, but I feel great about it.”

Siegel has been at conferences with Jim Eliason, the commercialization center's director, and once had its assistant director, Danny Heumann, speak on behalf of patients at a stem cell conference at the United Nations.

“They have the right team there,” said Siegel of Eliason and Heumann, who was honored by the stem cell summit in 2005 with its grassroots advocate of the year award.

“Danny knows everyone in the field. He knows the researchers. He understands the science. He's such a valuable addition to the TechTown team,” said Siegel.

Heumann, who suffered a spinal cord injury the week he was supposed to start college, was active with the Michigan Citizens for Stem Cell Research and Cures, which will be given this year's award for national education. Another state group, CureMichigan, will get the grass-roots advocacy award. Both were instrumental in the passage of Proposal 2.

According to his Web site, www.heumannlycapable.com, his Daniel Heumann Foundation for Spinal Cord Research has raised more than \$4 million since 1986.

Previous World Stem Cell Summits were held in Dallas in conjunction with the Baylor College of Medicine; in Palo Alto, with the Center for Biomedical Ethics at Stanford University; in Boston, with the Harvard Stem Cell Institute; and at the University of Wisconsin, with the school's Stem Cell and Regenerative Medicine Center.