

Boston again lands biggest biotech convention

State limits on gifts don't dissuade group from return to Hub

By D.C. Denison
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The world's largest annual gathering of the biotechnology industry is once again coming to Boston, despite warnings that new state regulations would deter convention organizers from bringing such events back to the state.

Earlier this year, Massachusetts officials passed what was dubbed the "gift ban," regulations that limit the contributions, gratuities, and meals pharmaceutical and medical device firms can give to doctors. At the time, Robert Coughlin, president of the Massachusetts Biotechnology Council, warned that the new rules, which were considered to be the most stringent in the nation, would make event organizers think twice before coming back to Boston.

"Massachusetts is now seen as the most unfriendly state in the nation toward industry," Coughlin said in March. "In these tough economic times, you don't want to send a chilling message to an industry that's a growth industry."

Yesterday, Coughlin stood with Governor Deval Patrick and Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino to announce that the annual BIO International Convention will return to Boston in June 2012, but he stood by his earlier comments.

"The gift ban still has a chilling effect," he said. "Fortunately, this convention primarily attracts biotech workers and researchers, not doctors, so it wasn't a major factor."

Coughlin said he believes that the regulations hamper sales and marketing efforts by life sciences firms, "which has a trickle down impact on the money that's available for research and development."

James E. Rooney, executive director of the Massachusetts Convention Center Authority, said he expects that by 2012, federal

legislation will supersede the Massachusetts rules on donations to doctors, but for now the gift ban complicates negotiations with life sciences groups that hold conventions because the rules have to be explained. Rooney said that other states competing for the same events will emphasize or exaggerate the difficulty of dealing with the Massachusetts regulations when talking to convention planners.

The annual BIO Convention rotates among a small group of cities with significant life sciences industries, including San Diego and Atlanta. The 2012 convention, which is expected to attract more than 26,000 attendees, will be hosted at the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center in South Boston, the nearby Westin Hotel, the World Trade Center, and the Hynes Center in the Back Bay.

In 2007, when the convention was last in Boston, Patrick used the event to unveil his \$1 billion funding proposal for life sciences research, a 10-year program designed to cement the state's reputation as a global powerhouse of medicine and biotechnology.

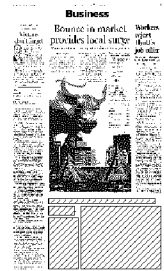
The Massachusetts Life Sciences Center, which was created to manage Patrick's initiative in 2008, has committed \$48.5 million in public investments to a wide variety of projects, according to its president, Susan Windham-Bannister.

Last week, it approved an additional \$90 million in capital funding toward the construction of the \$405 million Albert Sherman Center at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester. The Sherman Center, planned as a 500,000-square-foot

research-and-education facility, is scheduled to be completed in 2012.

According to a study released in April by the Massachusetts Biotechnology Council, which is changing its name to MassBio, Massachusetts has more than 40,000 biotech jobs, up from about 30,000 in 2002.

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ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Susan Windham-Bannister, president of the Massachusetts Life Sciences Center, helped welcome news that the BIO International Convention is coming to Boston.



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Robert Coughlin, president of the Massachusetts Biotechnology Council, says state limits on gifts can have a chilling effect.