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Researchers set sights on funds

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Business writer

SPRINGFIELD - Companies and researchers including the Pioneer Valley Life Sciences Institute in Springfield should be able to start claiming their part of the state's \$1 billion Life Sciences Initiative by Jan. 1. "Accessing that money is now the big thing," said Dr. Paul Friedmann, the executive director of the Pioneer Valley Life Sciences Institute. Applications for grants may be made starting Jan. 1.

The initiative, signed into law by Gov. Deval L. Patrick in June, includes \$5.5 million for a business incubator at the Pioneer Valley Life Sciences Institute where high-tech medical companies can get their start and develop technology for market.

"This will be a hub," said Susan R. Windham-Bannister, in reference to the Pioneer Valley institute. She is chief executive officer of the Massachusetts Life Sciences Center, the entity charged with spending the \$1 billion over 10 years.

She spoke Monday at a conference at the Pioneer Valley Life Sciences Institute.

But Windham-Bannister already has seen her budget cut from \$25 million to \$15 million this year due to a weakening economy.

The cut won't affect capital spending such as the \$5.5 million for the Pioneer Valley Life Sciences Institute or \$95 million set aside for a life sciences research center at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

The cuts also won't change the system of tax breaks for life-sciences companies included in \$1 billion initiative.

But it does mean that the Life Sciences Center will have \$10 million less to give in grants this year, Windham-Bannister said. She said she is trying to find other sources for that money.

The conference was held Monday in a room at the North Main Street center where Friedmann hopes to expand the institute's laboratory space with \$1.6 million in federal money, part of \$10 million in federal money the institute has received with the help of U.S. Rep. Richard E. Neal, D-Springfield. Neal attended Monday's event.

"Companies who do this research often don't have a lot of capital to invest," Friedmann said. "Our equipment is very expensive. We have microscopes here that cost \$100,000 to \$300,000."

Founded in 2002 as a joint venture between the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and Baystate Health, the Pioneer Valley Life Sciences Institute has more than 40 scientists, administrators and support staff. It also plans to add 10 more staff in the next year. Scientists at the institute are working on breast cancer, diabetes and how cells die.

Windham-Bannister also spoke of how the Life Sciences Initiative grants can be used to help biotech companies bridge gaps in their funding. It's common for scientists to get money to do initial research, but then not be able to fund all the work it takes to bring a drug or a device to the public.

"That's music to my ears," said Randal Chinnock, a physicist and the founder and chief executive officer of Optimum Technologies Inc., of Southbridge.

He has spent six years developing a fiber-optic device designed to use light to diagnose cancer rather than having a surgeon remove a sample for biopsy. It's undergoing clinical trials now.

"With the right kind of financing, we could have this to market in three years," he said. "Massachusetts would be a great place to

manufacture this. We have 40 employees now, it could grow to hundreds.

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