OPINION

Encouraging a bioscience bonanza in LA County: Mark-Ridley Thomas

Lab manager Kaitlin Smith holds a sample of saliva at the Institute for Interdisciplinary Salivary Bioscience Research lab at UCI in Irvine on Monday, July 24, 2017.

By MARK RIDLEY THOMAS |
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The entertainment industry has Hollywood. The computer world has its Silicon Valley. The financial world its Wall Street. In each case, people and companies gravitate toward their peers and the creative and entrepreneurial energy that working in proximity to each other generates.

In the booming bioscience industry the same paradigm exists. That’s why there is a life sciences cluster in Boston and a bioscience corridor in San Diego where literally hundreds of startups and mature bioscience companies operate cheek to cheek to manufacture pharmaceuticals, medical devices, sell and distribute health care
products and invent new medical delivery systems.

Now, I ask, why not a bioscience cluster/corridor centered around the Harbor-UCLA Medical Center on the borders of Torrance and Carson?

One of LA County’s best kept secrets is that it is home to a growing bioscience industry that directly employs 90,000 people (indirectly another 100,000) and generates $42.5 billion in economic activity.

Last year, our region’s hospitals and universities received a record $1.1 billion in National Health Institute grants. Despite these hallmarks of success, Los Angeles’ bioscience industry has yet to become as muscular as its counterparts in Boston, San Diego and the San Francisco Bay area. In recent years, often quietly and unnoticed, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors has taken steps to nurture this industry so it can achieve its potential.

One major challenge is fostering the geographic clustering of bioscience talent and companies that, once created, would act as a magnet for yet more talent and companies. The industry thrives on clustering yet LA’s bioscience firms are widely dispersed.

To help in this regard, the Board in July approved creation of “overlay zones” wherein bioscience companies can establish their operations free of existing land-use restrictions that would otherwise significantly inhibit a “clustering” of bioscience commercial and manufacturing businesses. In the same vein, the Board agreed to negotiate with the non-profit Lundquist Institute, a highly-respected bioscience research organization, to lease and develop a 15-acre county-owned parcel on the Harbor-UCLA campus and develop it as a biotech industrial park — and future anchor for a cluster zone.

The growth of the bioscience sector in LA County has also been hampered by the “leaky bucket” effect. While our colleges and universities annually produce 5,000 life sciences graduates, these young people too often take their skills and entrepreneurial talent to the marquee bioscience clusters in Boston, San Francisco and San Diego. Some of this talent “leakiness” is a result of the absence of an infrastructure in Los Angeles to support startups.

To fix this shortcoming, the Board has funded bioscience “incubator” facilities on the East Los Angeles College and Harbor-UCLA campuses where dozens of startups can rent affordable office space and labs and receive technical training and business mentoring to help them thrive. In addition, the Board has invested $15 million in a $50 million public-private fund that will make affordable loans to small and mid-sized bioscience firms.

Finally, the Board, in collaboration with the South Bay Workforce Investment Board, has helped fund Bio-Flex, an apprenticeship program with a key objective of training the disadvantaged and people of color for good jobs in the bioscience industry. It is noteworthy that the first Bio-Flex classes included Torrance and Compton residents.
LA County’s bioscience industry and the Board’s support for it are both works in progress. But if we keep our eye on the prize our region can become a world leader in developing therapies and modalities that improve our health and provide thousands of rewarding and exciting jobs for generations to come.

*Mark Ridley-Thomas is a member of the LA County Board of Supervisors.*

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