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Big Time Genomics Comes to New York City

John Sterling



In the mid-1980s, one of the top officials overseeing a range of economic development projects for New York City invited me to lower Manhattan for lunch. After ensconcing ourselves in a restaurant near Battery Park, he asked me "Why hasn't GEN written an article on New York City as a major biotechnology center?" It was fortunate that I had not yet eaten anything when he posed his query to me because I might have choked on the spot. The only way I could respond, trying to be as polite as possible, was to answer his question with my own question, "did you say a major biotechnology center?"

Everyone in the life science world back then knew that the expense of living in New York City combined with a seeming reluctance of the part of the major local universities, health centers, and academic institutions to effectively cooperate with each other was a drag on NYC's ability to compete in the biotech arena. It was impossible to compare NYC at that time to eminent biotech centers such as those in the San Francisco Bay area and North Carolina. I often wondered when and if NYC was going to get serious about biotech.

Well, the announcement last month that the New York Genome Center will open in February is the latest and most important example, at least in my opinion, that NYC is moving into biotech big time. Indeed, bioresearch has already been taking place at the East River Science Park, the Audubon Center near the New York Presbyterian Hospital in Upper Manhattan, and the SUNY Downstate Medical Center. The city is also looking to further develop the BioBat facility at the Brooklyn Army Terminal for research, laboratory, and biomanufacturing uses.

The NY Genome Center looks like it is going to be something special. I am not alone in thinking this way. Almost 73% of the respondents to a recent GEN poll believe that the center will succeed at growing the city's biotech cluster. And why not? The \$125 million center will carry out its activities in a 120,000 square foot facility. The public-private initiative will involve the activities of 11 academic medical centers in an organized and unified manner.

Eric D. Green, M.D., Ph.D., director of the National Human Genome Research Institute at the NIH, said "the new center is poised to help make genomic medicine a reality." Russell Carson, general partner, Welsh, Carson, Anderson & Stowe, and chairman of the New York Genome Center, noted that the center "represents the largest collaboration to date among New York City-based biomedical and clinical research organizations ... It will enhance the City's position as one of the foremost centers for medical research."

As the editor in chief of GEN, which is an international biotech news magazine, I never have and never will play favorites for what gets covered in GEN based on anything other than pure news value or the technical appropriateness and applicability of an article for our readers. But I must admit, being a born-and-bred New Yorker who grew up on the streets of Washington Heights, I am delighted that my city is embracing biotech to a degree never seen before.

If that NYC economic official I mentioned earlier happens to read this blog, please drop me an email or give me a call. Whether you still work for the city or not, lunch will be on me.

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