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Maryland's coming bioscience revolution

By FRED D. MASON JR.

For the first time in two years, Maryland's economy is growing. To ensure that Maryland makes a full recovery, though, state lawmakers must fight for the jobs of tomorrow. Among other major initiatives, this means supporting the life sciences industry.

The truth is that Maryland has been coping with a jobs crisis for decades. Our state's labor force once relied on industries like steel, auto manufacturing and shipping for steady employment. With the decline of these industries, Maryland residents have struggled to find work that offers the same stability and satisfaction that industrial jobs provided.

In recent years, however, the rise of the state's bioscience industry has provided hope for Maryland workers.

Today, our state hosts more than 400 core bioscience firms, which directly employ 29,000 people. Wages in this industry have grown by 6.4 percent each year since 2001.

The high-paying jobs that this industry creates aren't just in science. Highly skilled construction workers are needed to build bioscience plants. Accountants are needed to balance the books. Electricians, plumbers and other skilled tradesmen — good union workers — are needed to keep these facilities running.

The life sciences sector supports jobs in other industries, as well. Just think of all the schoolteachers needed to educate the children of the folks that work in these facilities. Or the food service workers who are employed at restaurants near these firms. These folks keep Maryland's economy strong.

All told, it's estimated that the life science industry is responsible for nearly 90,000 jobs in Maryland. These firms generate about $2 billion a year in revenue for the state.

Maryland's bioscience industry also could be on the cusp of developing revolutionary new medical treatments for conditions like HIV/AIDS, cancer and Parkinson's. About 45,000 researchers and scientists currently reside in Maryland. No other state has more bioscience professionals per capita. World-class research universities like Johns Hopkins call Maryland home. And, the state boasts 60 federal agencies and research laboratories, including offices of the National Institutes of Health and the Food and Drug Administration.

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The success of this industry, though, is hardly guaranteed. Other states — such as North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Colorado — are working hard to attract biotechnology companies. As are other countries, especially India. Plus, the financial crisis has had a real impact on bioscience — since January 2008, the number of publicly traded biotech firms in the United States has declined by 25 percent.

Thankfully, our lawmakers have done a good job of supporting biotech research thus far. Last year, for instance, Gov. Martin O'Malley created the Maryland Biotechnology Center as a division of our state's Department of Business and Economic Development. One of the center's responsibilities is providing employment training to advance the life sciences sector.

Although initiatives like this are a good start, a great deal remains to be done to ensure the long-term growth of Maryland's bioscience sector.

To begin with, lawmakers need to support efforts to improve science and math education at all levels of the Maryland education system. The training of tomorrow's bioscience professionals has to begin today.

Moreover, our federal representatives need to ensure that the United States remains an attractive environment for biotech business.

In the coming years, Maryland has the potential to become the center of an industry that will provide the world with state-of-the-art medicines; high-paying, stable jobs; and economic prosperity. Lawmakers need to seize this opportunity, and make sure that our state — and our country — remains a place where bioscience can flourish.

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