

Medical Main Street

Shaping A Health Science Cluster in Oakland County

by Ralph Ward

One hundred years ago, the technological center of America may well have been Michigan. With the young auto industry already gravitating here, resources and brainpower were focusing research on such fields as metallurgy, chemistry, engineering, mass manufacturing, and engine design. Through the rest of the century, Michigan hugely expanded and advanced this nexus of technology.

Early in the 21st Century, though, it's popular to think of Michigan as a rusting hulk compared to its past technological grandeur. But especially in Southeast Michigan, such a critical mass of expertise and suppliers continues to be a rich resource for technology development. While Michigan's moves into green energy and transportation make headlines, there is a field with even greater growth potential. Despite the economy, this field is booming, and it's one where Michigan can put its hard-earned savvy to good use – medical technology research.

Oakland County is making this goal a reality through its new "Medical Main Street" alliance. Launched in 2008, Medical Main Street is a coalition of the county's hospitals, universities, medical device and biopharma companies, and some of the county's top medical professionals. The audacious goal – to create a global center of innovation in health care, research and development, education and commercialization in the life sciences industry.

Medical Main Street's origins go back to 2003, when Oakland County performed a research study to determine what growth sectors could take the place of the shrinking auto industry. "One sector that was pulling away with the fastest growth was health care and life sciences," recalls Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson. Aside from 50 hospitals and medical centers, Oakland County features 35 university life science research centers and the third-highest number of high tech workers for any county in the nation. Further, Oakland is at the nexus of life sciences education, research and innovation throughout the region. Half of Michigan college degrees awarded in 2006 were in these specialties, and there are over 4,900 active clinical trials in the state.

A Booming Sector

Though health care/life sciences already employed over 93,000 in the county at the time of the study, findings showed that "even if we did nothing, the sector would add 45,000 new jobs over the next decade." But Patterson and other county leaders planned an effort far beyond "nothing." Oakland's economic development, health care, business, government and education leaders convened in 2008 to launch Medical Main Street as a targeted marketing and development tool for the county.

Despite being barely two years old, Medical Main Street already offers an impressive structure and leadership. The initiative operates through Oakland County's economic development office, and has an all-star board that includes leaders of Beaumont Hospitals, Henry Ford Health Systems, Ferndale Laboratories,

Oakland University, MichBio, and Rockwell Medical Technologies.

But Medical Main Street is more than names on a letterhead, as proven by its growing list of achievements. Royal Oak Medical devices in August announced a \$2.6 million facility expansion, creating 68 new jobs. The Oakland University William Beaumont School of Medicine, scheduled to open in 2011, will infuse millions of dollars and hundreds of new jobs into the local economy, as well boosting the county's medical research

Along with physicians on the Medical Main Street board, there is strong physician presence in its "ambassadors" group, a larger, informal board that aids in promotion, resource support and networking.

infrastructure. Noxixus, MicroDose Life Science, and Oakland Genetics are a few more of the firms expanding their footprint in the county through Medical Main Street efforts. The initiative is also busy marketing the county's life science credentials, with an aggressive schedule of trade shows and outreach to prospective companies across the world.

Physicians Are Key

Oakland County's Medical Main Street is showing strong success with its gee-whizzy life science and biotech conquests. But since its inception, the group has gained a focus on the one link which makes it all possible – physicians. Medical Main Street originally seemed "aimed at medical technology, and pharmaceutical makers, but physicians were pretty much ignored," recalls Doctor Donald Peven, president of the Oakland County Medical Society. "We stuck our noses in and said 'hey, this is a good idea, but it's doctors who drive most of the medical spending in this country, and they need to be a part.'" Adds Donna LaGosh, executive director of the Society, "When we heard about [Medical Main Street] at its launch, we realized it was very important to have a practicing physician perspective."

The nascent group proved very welcoming to physician involvement. Along with physicians on the Medical Main Street board, there is strong physician presence in its "ambassadors," group, a larger, informal board that aids in promotion, resource support and networking. These ambassadors include the Oakland medical society, United Physicians, and Michigan Vascular Center. David Schreiber, chief strategist for Oakland County, and the executive managing Medical Main Street, recalls that the ambassadors group sprung up spontaneously in the community. "We started getting calls from groups asking what they could do

to help – they recognized we had something here and wanted to be involved.” Physicians have been among the most active, says Doctor Peven. “As part of the ambassadors group, we’ve been evangelizing for the project.”

The physician involvement adds an exciting spark to the Medical Main Street “cluster” approach. Physicians, medical research, bioscience, pharma, a medical school, and Southeast Michigan’s deep engineering savvy create a chain reaction that is not only greater than the sum of its part, but leads to even bigger future growth. New materials and processes from the auto industry find exciting new potential in health care. A few examples here are new composite materials for medical implants, stent designs, and imaging technology. Top physicians and medical researchers bump into each other over lunch, swap ideas and give each other reality checks. Pharmaceutical and device makers gain an edge in learning about research when the researchers are working just down the block. And venture capital is drawn to invest and drive growth where the action is – and Medical Main Street is creating that action. “The more word spreads, the more there will be other opportunities for investment,” predicts Patterson. “Clustering gives more opportunity to take advantage of a center for health care excellence.”

Still, all the potential of initiatives like Medical Main Street come back to the contribution of physicians. “Anything with the term ‘medical’ in it should include physicians,” notes LaGosh. The interest of physicians in Medical Main Street goes beyond the “top down” aspects of research and venture capital. “One

thing we’ve learned about physicians is that most medical practices are small businesses,” notes Schreiber. “It’s important to be supporting them so they can hire more people and add their investment to the community.” LaGosh concurs – “Physicians are not just clinicians, but business owners who generate revenue, pay taxes and insure employees.”

Spillover Benefits

Though a project of Oakland County, Medical Main Street is already reaching outside its boundaries. “Certainly this will grow to be regionwide,” predicts Schreiber. “This is not exclusive to Oakland [County]. Many of our hospital board members have facilities all over the region.” Spillover benefits from boosting the tax base, health infrastructure and employment climate will help the entire state.

This “without borders” view shapes the growth plans of the overall Medical Main Street initiative. Gary Paavola, executive director of the Michigan Vascular Center in Flint (a strong supporter of Medical Main Street), sees the effort as a step toward turning the region into a health care version of California’s Silicon Valley, or North Carolina’s Research Triangle. The county is “like a coral reef. The infrastructure of health care, engineering, manufacturing and political supply the nutrients needed to be successful. In return, a successful Medical Main Street will grow and expand throughout the state.” **MM**

The author is a business writer based in Riverdale, Michigan.



Preferred Products and Service for MSMS Members.

TAKE THREE AND CALL ME IN THE MORNING

Comcast Business Class Internet

4x Faster than DSL and T1

Transmit medical data and download images in seconds.

Comcast Business Class is the prescribed choice for phone, Internet and TV.

Discount available for MSMS members!

Call Mark Calvert at 248-808-6103 or Karen Washington at 248-233-4634 today to design a solution for you.



Not available in all areas. Business Internet: Speed comparison between Comcast 6 Mbps service and standard 1.5 DSL and T-1 (downloads only). Actual speeds vary and are not guaranteed. Comcast © 2010. All rights reserved.