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Workforce center dedicated in Johnston

A new vocational center will prepare workers for jobs in pharmaceuticals

By PEGGY LIM, Staff Writer

CLAYTON -- As local, state and federal officials got up one by one to praise Johnston County's newly opened Workforce Development Center Thursday, workers clad in goggles, masks, gloves and full scrub suits were busy in the lab across the hall.

There they injected blue-tinted water into a steady stream of small glass bottles. In the real thing, they'd be bottling blood products for Clayton-based pharmaceutical company Talecris.

But it was hands-on training -- the kind that increasingly will take place on county grounds.

"Johnston County is on the ... rise," said State Sen. Fred Smith of Clayton at a dedication ceremony Thursday. "We're going to be able to attract new industry because of this facility."

The vocational training center, part of Johnston Community College, targets the pharmaceutical industry. It is a stone's throw from a cluster of pharmaceutical companies in Clayton, including Novo Nordisk, Hospira and Talecris. About 10 percent of the state's bioprocessing workforce is based in Clayton, said Michael de Sherbinin, director of county economic development, and Johnston officials want to ensure that the industry continues to flourish in the county.

Funding for the center came largely via a $4.1 million loan from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The debt will be paid off by the county and a special tax -- of 8 cents for each $100 of assessed property value -- on companies within Johnston's Research Training Zone.

The zone includes pharmaceutical companies in Clayton as well as the North Aviation Industrial Park near the county's airport.

Johnston's Workforce Development Center is the first of its kind in the state, said Martin Lancaster, president of the North Carolina community college system. It is a model of how community colleges, public schools, universities as well as business and government leaders can pool resources to attract and retain industries, he said.

The facility includes three science labs, two computer labs, a distance learning classroom and seven general classrooms. Almost all of the nearby pharmaceutical companies will require their employees to have some training at the center.

"It's going to be a great asset," said John Pratt, former general manager of the neighboring insulin-producing Novo Nordisk plant. Novo was among the first to use the facility in July, when the company held one of its weeklong training sessions there.

Talecris is also gearing up to conduct a training session at the facility in October.

Johnston Community College will offer associate degree programs in bioprocessing and biology and other coursework at the facility. Ultimately, the center hopes to partner with N.C. Central and N.C. State universities to offer additional classes that could lead to bachelor's degrees.

The facility will cater to all levels of workers, including high school students, displaced workers and those looking to continue their education.

Hugo Luna, 42, of Clayton said he hopes the night bio classes he takes there will help him move from

his job as a welder to pharmaceutical research. "It would be a transition for me," he said. "But I really enjoy it."

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