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Tonix Pharmaceuticals buys 44 acres in Hamilton, plans vaccine production facility

BY MARTIN KIDSTON

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A pharmacist labels syringes in a clean room where doses of COVID-19 vaccines are handled. Tonix Pharmaceuticals has closed on 44 acres in Hamilton and plans to construct a vaccine development facility in 2021. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan via CN)

Saying that humans will have to coexist with variations of COVID-19, a pharmaceutical company based in New Jersey plans to open a new production facility in Hamilton for the development of domestic vaccines, including those aimed at coronavirus.

The company, Tonix Pharmaceuticals Holding Corp. (TNXP), closed on 44 acres of land off Old Corvallis Road in Hamilton, where it plans to break ground on the new facility in late 2021.

The deal was brokered by Sterling Commercial Real Estate in Missoula and announced late Tuesday night. The news became public on Wednesday morning. Parsons Behle & Latimer also help negotiate the deal.

“As we saw with this deal, collaboration is the key to robust economic opportunity in Montana,” said Matt Mellott, lead broker with Sterling CRE. “Ravalli County officials, Julie Foster with the Ravalli County Economic Authority, and the local seller all played critical roles in moving this project forward.”

Tonix is developing a potential COVID-19 vaccine and expects to have early data on its efficacy in the first quarter of 2021. The company’s leading vaccine candidate, TNX-1800, features a single shot and is based upon the smallpox vaccine developed more than 200 years ago.

Dr. Seth Lederman, co-founder and CEO of Tonix, said it’s unknown whether the first generation of COVID vaccines currently being administered to the public will provide year-after-year protection, or block forward transmission of the virus.

New strains of the virus have already been reported in Europe, and like the flu virus, COVID could require an evolving vaccine to stay ahead of future mutations.

“The COVID-19 pandemic exposed weaknesses in domestic vaccine development and manufacturing capabilities,” said Lederman. “We believe it’s critical to bring these capabilities and high-tech jobs back to the U.S., both to finish the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and to prepare for potential future pandemics.”

Even when the current pandemic subsides, Lederman said it’s likely that COVID will become endemic, meaning that humans will have to live with the virus. Like other diseases, it will serve as a constant threat that can only be managed by vaccinating the population.

“To manage COVID-19 in the future, we need a next generation COVID-19 vaccine that can be part of the standard childhood immunizations, like MMR for mumps, measles and rubella,” Lederman said. “We expect that such a vaccine will be a live-virus vaccine, because of their potential to provide durable protection and block transmission.”

The company’s new facility in Montana will serve as its base vaccine production facility and will support a number of new jobs. It will also grow the bioscience industry in western Montana. Both Missoula and Hamilton have seen significant growth in the sector in recent years.

Tonix will join Rocky Mountain Laboratories in Hamilton – an internationally recognized leader in vaccine development and virology research. GlaxoSmithKline also has a vaccine manufacturing facility in Hamilton.

Montana’s congressional delegation praised the announcement.

“It’s great to see Montana leading in the bioscience industry which will help support Montana jobs and end our reliance on other countries for critical vaccines and prescription drugs,” said Sen. Steve Daines.

Sen. Jon Tester said, “Montanans are hard workers and I’m pleased to see more manufacturing jobs come to our state. The growing bioscience industry in Montana is good for our economy and will improve our public health.”

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According to Sterling CRE, the 44-acre property is large enough to accommodate additional buildings in the future. Tonix hopes to expand on the site over time. Such an expansion would result in more jobs and economic growth in the coming years.

“It’s no surprise that the bioscience industry is thriving in Montana,” said Governor-elect Gianforte. “We have an unmatched work ethic. We’re problem solvers. And we do it all from one of the most beautiful places in the world.”