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City snags Nashville biotech firm

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Birmingham has snared a new corporate headquarters after a Tennessee biotech company said Wednesday it plans to set up shop near UAB and might hire 50 people in the next two years.

Nashville-based BioDtech Inc. said it plans to expand its research lab near the University of Alabama at Birmingham. It will use the new space at business incubator Innovation Depot for its head office beginning in July. Production and distribution will remain in Tennessee.

The company's investors include the Birmingham Technology Fund, a partnership between the University of Alabama System and Birmingham-based money managers Greer Capital Advisors.

It has \$22 million to invest in biotech companies, and a mission to encourage them to move to Birmingham, a draw for such businesses because of UAB's titanic medical and biological research institutes.

"That's what we do," said Alan Dean, a managing partner at Greer. "Our mission is to bring companies to Birmingham, and that was a condition of our investment in BioDtech."

The company is small now, and only four people are coming: the two founders and two scientists. The company makes a powder-like compound that detects, kills and removes dangerous toxins from tissues and fluids used in biological research.

The peptides might also be good for treating sepsis, an infection-related condition which kills 1,400 people a day worldwide, said founder and vice president Ira Weiss.

Other target markets are cystic fibrosis, AIDS and eye care, Weiss said. It's not out of the question that demand might outstrip the Nashville plant's output. Birmingham might be the site of a new one.

"It's possible we could have 50 or more employees in Birmingham in 18 to 24 months," Weiss said. "Birmingham allows us to tap into a real talent pool and a growth zone for biotech."

UAB gets about \$400 million a year in federal medical research grants, and that kind of money draws top-notch researchers, professors and students. Those are the very kind of people in high demand by biotech companies, said Susan Matlock, chief executive of the Innovation Depot business incubator BioDtech will call home.

"We have got a critical mass now, but we are trying to amp it up even further," Matlock said.

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