

## VGTI Florida makes its mark in Port St. Lucie's future

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PORT ST. LUCIE — The Vaccine & Gene Therapy Institute of Florida laid the groundwork Wednesday for a research facility pegged to help boost regional jobs by the thousands and possibly discover cures for diseases like HIV and cancer.

Key contributors to the institute's expansion sunk their hands into a square of wet cement, marking the beginnings of a facility that will help the Interstate 95 research corridor continue to take shape.

“What I see is, this whole area (Tradition) will not be recognizable in 10 years,” said Dr. Jay Nelson, founder and executive director of VGTI Florida. “There are going to be multiple institutes here, biotech companies, a hospital, clinical studies being done here, drug trials we’ll participate on. We’re really excited about all this.”

The three-story structure will open in 2012 to house VGTI Florida's research on vaccines that fight cancer and infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS and dengue fever. Its studies also aim to improve the immune system functions of the aging population.

The Florida Governor's Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development estimated VGTI Florida and related start-up companies will support more than 1,460 positions, generate \$2 billion in payroll and \$4.2 billion in added value in Florida.

VGTI Florida hopes to add 150 positions to its current base of 50 employees, earning \$60,000 per year on average, by 2018.

The new VGTI Florida facility adds to the biotech movement booming along Interstate 95, from Torrey Pines Institute for Molecular Studies in Port St. Lucie to the Scripps Research Institute in Jupiter.

The institute currently operates in a 30,000-square-foot temporary facility on the third floor of the adjacent Torrey Pines Institute for Molecular Studies building. Its new building on 8 acres adjacent to Torrey Pines will incorporate numerous high-standard green, sustainable features.

“We’re going to have a world-class research institute, right here in Port St. Lucie,” Nelson said. “World-class researchers here, to work with world-class researchers at Torrey Pines.”

In January 2008, the Florida Governor’s Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development agreed to contribute \$60 million to VGTI Florida from the state’s Innovation Incentive Fund. The city of Port St. Lucie also committed to invest \$53 million in the institute.

Collaborative efforts with Martin Memorial Health Systems have already begun for VGTI Florida. Current research with Martin Memorial has centered on the role of the immune system in HIV, influenza and cancer.

And additional clinical trials and research with Martin Memorial will start when the hospital system’s newest 80-bed facility in Tradition is completed in 2014.

“It’s important to have a critical mass. It’s not as important for just VGTI or Torrey Pines, it’s important for the group,” said Dr. Richard Houghten, Torrey Pines president and CEO. “You’ve so many things you can add, and show, and grow. This is a pretty amazing development for a community the size of Port St. Lucie.”

