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Section: Business

From 'clean room' space to 'wet lab'

By **David Wichner**
ARIZONA DAILY STAR

A new study from Arizona State University points to a possible solution to the shortage of "wet" laboratory space in Arizona -



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conversion of "clean-room" space vacated by semiconductor companies.

But the idea is more likely to take hold in Phoenix, where clean-room space is going begging, than in Tucson, where such space is scarce.

A lack of ready wet labs - which feature special plumbing, ventilation and other features - has been identified as a stumbling block to attracting biotech companies to Arizona.

A study by ASU's Office of Economic Affairs cites the conversion of clean rooms - which feature special air-handling systems to remove airborne dust and contaminants - as a less expensive and faster alternative to the construction of new labs.

Converting clean rooms to wet labs costs about 60 percent of the expense of building new wet-lab space from scratch, the study found. While new lab facilities can take up to three years to design and construct and cost upwards of \$350 per square foot, conversion can be done in months and cost less than \$200 a square foot, according to the ASU study.



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The report identified more than 1.4 million square feet of potential clean-room space in the Phoenix area, resulting from the downsizing of the local semiconductor industry.

But in Tucson, there's one little problem.

"There's not much (vacant) clean-room space in Tucson," said Bob Davis, a first vice president of CB Richard Ellis who specializes in industrial real estate.

Davis said clean rooms share some of the same mechanical features as wet labs but would require the addition of "gas hoods" - enclosures ventilated to carry away gases produced during lab processes - and other equipment that might make conversion costly.

"It could help, but any user they're trying to attract, like a bio-life sciences company, I'll bet they have their own specifications," Davis said.

"Generally, everything costs more than you think it will cost."

Officials of the University of Arizona Science and Technology Park floated the idea of converting dry lab space to wet labs when the Arizona Center for Innovation was launched last year.

The park has about 4,000 square feet of available clean-room space and about 2,200 square feet of "laser lab" space vacated by a company last year.

Converting clean rooms to lab space could result in savings of time and money, if infrastructures such as industrial sewer systems are accessible, said Marshall Worden of the UA Office of Economic Development.

But converting large clean rooms such as those used in the semiconductor industry also could involve added costs to partition off

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areas to create small labs for individual research, Worden said.

"If you have a lot of small users that did not want to be commingled, it's a question of how the space can be segregated," he said.

Optics meets bio

Kathleen Perkins, CEO of Breault Research Organization, and Mark Fink, Breault's director of engineering services, will speak about the optics company and the prospects for co-branding the Tucson region as a "bio-optics" center at the next breakfast meeting of the BioIndustry Organization of Southern Arizona, or Bio-SA. The meeting begins at 7 a. m. Nov. 5 at the Westin La Paloma Resort and Spa, 3800 E. Sunrise Drive.

The cost is \$20 for Bio-SA members, \$25 for nonmembers. For information or to register, call 297-4030 or go to www.bio-sa.org

- *Contact reporter David Wichner at 573-4181 or dwichner@azstarnet.com.*

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