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## Incubator completes circle of life-science research

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St. Louis County's own double Helix is already paying dividends for bioscience businesses, and county officials hope it will boost the region's economy the way the discovery of the DNA double helix galvanized genetic research 60 years ago.

Construction is under way at the new Helix Center, a 33,000-square-foot plant and life-science incubator at 1100 Corporate Square Drive in Creve Coeur that will give life to new bioscience businesses and a second chance for laid-off research scientists.

By early next year, the St. Louis County Economic Council hopes the \$7.5 million center will be home to businesses that may, at first, consist of little more than an idea. Eventually, with access to wet and dry lab space as well as partnerships with other scientists, they could grow into fully fledged companies. The other strand of the double helix, the \$1.5 million Helix Fund, will provide seed money to grow the new companies and keep them in St. Louis.

"We reviewed a continuum of spaces that very successful regions have developed, from very early-stage incubation facilities all the way up to more sophisticated and therefore more expensive facilities," said **Denny Coleman**, president and CEO of the St. Louis County Economic Council. "As we looked around the St. Louis region, we saw the gap at the early stage. That's why the Helix Center was created, to help that very early-stage research get commercialized."

Already, the Helix Fund's first beneficiary is looking forward to new ventures and new partnerships at the center. Phycal, an algae biofuel startup, is investigating new concepts that could lower costs and improve research, said **Kevin Berner**, president and CEO.

"Making algae productive is so new and different that there are many things that need to be done. It would be the height of arrogance to believe that we are going to come up with all of the good ideas," he said. "That's one of the great things about our St. Louis location. There is such a high density of plant biotech work going on there, you are more likely to find it in St. Louis than you are in most other places."

Phycal has a lab at the BioResearch and Development Growth Park (BRDG) at the Danforth Plant Science Center, along with headquarters in Cleveland and a pilot plant in Hawaii. The company employs six people in St. Louis, and Berner hopes to more than double that with the help of \$100,000 from the Helix Fund and a \$24.2 million federal research grant from the U.S. Department of Energy. Berner and other principals are evaluating potential partners and hope to find some at the Helix Center, which will be located less than a mile away.

**Richard Sayre**, the firm's other co-founder and director of the Enterprise Rent-A-Car Institute for Renewable Fuels at the Danforth Center, said Phycal is considering spinning off independent startups to address some of the technological challenges of genetically modifying algae. He couldn't divulge any details, however.

"I can say that we anticipate developing new divisions centered around some of the algal biotech traits that we are developing with Phycal, and that will be some additional opportunities for employing people," he said.

That's exactly what county officials want to hear. The Helix Center is also partly designed to prevent a scientist brain drain after layoffs at firms such as [Pfizer](#) and [Monsanto](#), Coleman said.

"It will be a great facility for new startups in the plant and life-sciences arena, and as such will be able to take advantage of a lot of the expertise, some of which resides in the laid-off workers from Pfizer and other life-science companies," he said.

**Nancy Schnoebelen**, vice president of marketing and communications for the county economic council, said some early stage ventures might not be developed enough to move into the BRDG Park — at least not yet.

"It's like the infant and not so much the adolescent stage of the startup," she said. "The hope is that once these early stage companies do grow, then they become strong enough to leave the incubator and go to BRDG Park. That will be their next flight."

The county used \$2.4 million from the federal Economic Development Administration to buy the site of the Helix Center in March and is using \$5.1 million in county money to renovate it. The county funds come from land lease money Las Vegas-based [Pinnacle Entertainment](#) pays for its new River City Casino in Lemay. The St. Louis County Port Authority will receive at least \$4 million a year in land lease payments for the casino; at least \$3 million of that goes to Lemay projects, and from the remainder, the port authority allocated \$500,000 a year for at least three years to establish the Helix Fund.

**Jim Carrington**, who takes over as director of the Danforth Center in May, said he looks forward to seeing what emerges from the new incubator. He believes growth in bioscience will stem from the marketplace, and with the Helix Fund and Center, companies that need a head start will have a place to grow their ideas into money makers.

"Places like universities talk about developing this interface between pure research and commercialization — a lot of places talk about that, but relatively few places do it well," Carrington said. "But in and around the Danforth Center, the attitude of the broader community, and the support through groups like the St. Louis County Economic Council, I saw these as very positive things."

Carrington, who is leaving his post as director of the Center for Genome Research and Biocomputing at [Oregon State University](#), said he was interested in coming to St. Louis because of that synergy.

"The Danforth Center, BRDG Park and the St. Louis region now is identified as the place to go," Carrington said. "This is where the young companies can really flourish, and where companies can really take off."