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Nonprofit wet lab incubator opens in Irvine, filling hole in Orange County's growing biomedical industry



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The new lab space at University Lab Partners, an independent, non-profit, wet-lab incubator created by The Beall Family Foundation of Newport Beach, during a tour in Irvine on Friday, Jan. 10, 2020. It was announced this week that it received a U.S. Commerce Department Economic Development Administration grant of \$3 million, which is the first such grant awarded to a program in Orange County in 20 years. (Photo by Kevin Sullivan, Orange County Register/SCNG)

By **HEATHER MCREA** | hmcrea@scng.com | Orange County Register

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A nonprofit laboratory that opened last month in Irvine will be helping to incubate breakthroughs in the biomedical industry.

More precisely, it is incubating the innovators who will be making the breakthroughs – by offering access to costly “wet” lab space and equipment that would be nearly impossible for a startup to buy itself.

And a \$3 million grant announced this week from the federal Commerce Department’s Economic Development Administration will help buy more specialized equipment, adding to the type and quality of research that can be done at the lab, said Karin Koch, University Lab Partners’ ecosystem director. It’s the first grant from the federal program received in Orange County in almost a decade.

University Lab Partners is a project of The Beall Family Foundation, based in

Northridge, Calif. The foundation was founded by the late Dr. H. Beall, a local



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Orange County has a growing biomedical industry, but had no lab with these facilities for safely handling chemicals and materials for experimenting, independent of a university setting. And Irvine is also a perfect mid-point between San Diego, an established leader in life science innovations, and Los Angeles, which is also a growing hub, Koch said.

“They were just tired of seeing companies leave Orange County and going to San Diego and L.A.,” she said.

Big companies sometimes “have a hard time doing big innovations” because it can be disruptive to day-to-day operations, said Stanton Rowe, CEO of NXT Biomedical, one of the first to use space at University Lab Partners. Rowe is recently retired from his role as chief scientific officer for Edwards Lifesciences in Irvine and he was involved in the development of the first transcatheter aortic valve replacement – a procedure that allows a patient to avoid a lengthy open heart surgery.

“There are very few laboratory spaces,” he said of Orange County. “It is a beautiful facility. I think it will be a cornerstone for device development here. It is amazingly perceptive and generous that the Beall foundation took on this project to begin with.”

Use of the facility and its support services is available through a membership, just like having a gym membership, Koch said. “When a company incubates with



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innovation and entrepreneurial program, UCI Beall Applied Innovation – renamed last year after the family donated millions in support.

The labs moved in with the program in The Cove, a “safe harbor” for entrepreneurs, which is part of the Irvine Company’s new creative work-space campus UCI Research Park, which was reimagined out of the old Broadcom headquarters into a place for innovation and collaboration among biomedical and tech companies.

Leaders of University Lab Partners and UCI Beall Applied Innovation use the term “ecosystem” in describing what is being created.
