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Biotech can flourish in state, says industry group's director

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CHARLES R. McCAULEY
News staff writer

Birmingham can have a flourishing biotechnology industry that would create jobs, attract talented people and bring new manufacturing plants, says Kathy Nugent, the new executive director of the Biotechnology Association of Alabama.

"Alabama has a lot of great companies.... The problem is people outside Alabama don't have an appreciation for the technology and for the industry that we've actually developed here," said Nugent, who started as the association's new leader early this year.

At the group's annual meeting today, she hopes "to get the ball rolling" in BAA's efforts to bolster the state's fledging biotech industry. Nugent will present her strategic plan to help connect the state's industry to the national and global network while raising its profile at home.

"My major goal is to increase the visibility of BAA and thereby increase the visibility of the biotechnology industry that we have here in the state," she said.

The plan involves telling the state's story to the "industry's thought leaders" - venture capitalists, investment bankers, big pharmaceutical companies and the media, she said. She wants to bring in industry players like the two panelists that are coming for the association's gathering at the Marriott Hotel Birmingham at 3590 Grandview Parkway.

Mike Huckman, who covers the drug, biotech and medical device industries for CNBC, and Reni J. Benjamin, senior biotech analyst for investment bank Rodman & Renshaw LLC, will join Charles E. Bugg, BioCryst Pharmaceuticals Inc. chairman, in a discussion on "Growing Biotech in Alabama."

Nugent said visitors can observe firsthand "that we have enough science, enough technology and infrastructure, enough exciting things going on that we can be competitive and have what it takes to be a real biotech cluster."

The BAA was formed in 1997 as the nonprofit statewide trade group for bio-related industries, research scientists, clinicians and business professionals working together to foster, develop and support the life sciences.

Nugent, who has been in biotech about 10 years, succeeds Mike Alder, who submitted his resignation a year ago this month to return to Utah as Brigham Young University's technology finance director.

A psychologist by training, Nugent said she became interested in biotechnology while doing post-doctoral studies that allowed her to work with some doctors at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center who did clinical trials on rare forms of cancer.

"That was my first exposure to biotechnology," said Nugent, who later went to work for Burns McClellan, an investor and public relations firm. She still works part time for the firm as senior vice president of public relations from Birmingham. Every six weeks or so, she goes back to New York because "it helps me stay connected to my New York and to my Wall Street connections."

Nugent returned to Alabama from New York in June 2005 after her husband, Jon, became vice president of communications for BioCryst, which was a client of Burns McClellan.

"With my background, I thought it would be a great opportunity" to lead BAA, she said. "I felt I could connect my network, the people that I know, with the people here. So far, that's working out."

E-mail: cmccauley@bhamnews.com

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