

Rapid success drives U of M Research Foundation plans for major office expansion

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Two of Memphis' biggest economic development wins this year can partly be credited to a \$300,000 investment the University of Memphis Research Foundation made last year.

The conversion of a 10,000-square-foot former library branch on the edge of campus into a "research park" coworking space for startups has been successful in its first year far beyond what the university could have planned. It helped propel Prospero to signing a 14,000-square-foot lease Downtown and was a key in attracting fast-growing DEVCON to town. Combined, the two firms plan to employ 410 Memphians within the next five years.



TREY CLARK | UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS
University of Memphis' UMRF Research Park

"We envisioned the retrofitting of that building to test out ... if there was any demand or interest from the private sector," said Ted Townsend, the university's chief economic development officer. "We were thrilled that they saw ... we could mutually align and offer more than just office space, with connectivity to our students and researchers."

With this rapid success, Townsend is working to grow the research park quickly — wanting to start construction on between 35,000 and 60,000 square feet of additional space within the next 18 months.

One possibility would be to build a new building on property just north of the research park. The university owns about 75 percent of the single-family parcels bounded by Midland Avenue, South Highland Street, Watauga Avenue, and Brister Street. There are a couple of other site possibilities, though, that Townsend said he's putting extra effort into right now because they could fit into a more aggressive timeline. He declined to disclose these other possibilities.

Townsend, who previously worked at the Tennessee Department of Economic & Community Development, wants a quick timeline because the research park is already almost at capacity and he's hoping to accommodate its 12 current tenants as they grow.

"There's a strong desire [among the companies] for that growth to take place still at the University of Memphis," he said.

The coworking space could also be an asset in the university's new efforts to recruit international companies to work alongside it in Memphis. For instance, the U of M was recently chosen by the U.S Department of State as one of 10 host sites that three CEOs from across the globe will visit.

The U of M Research Foundation targets companies that have inherent ties to research being conducted on campus, such as those in the technology, logistics, and pharmaceutical industries. The university launched the park, in part, because it is striving for Carnegie R1 status, and 95 percent of schools with this status have programs similar to the research park, Townsend said.

Some of the tenants are taking advantage of the proximity to the university's researchers, most notably Memphis-based Green Mountain Technology, which will be funding a postdoctoral position at the university.

But, the main draw to the research park has been access to students.

"The primary force is the access to the top talent ... within strategic departments at the university," Townsend said. "Students can work now ... and then it could become a fast track to a career."

Given unemployment rates near 4 percent for Shelby County and the country, this access to students has made a retrofitted library on Highland into a significant economic development asset for Memphis.

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