

Georgia bioscience center a new recruiting tool

By J. Scott Trubey , Thursday, Sept. 10, 2015

Gloved and gowned trainees carefully practiced filling vials of a clear liquid derived from human blood under the focused eyes of instructors and the unblinking lenses of a media horde.

The workers, new hires for the \$1 billion Baxalta pharmaceutical plant that will begin testing operations near Social Circle next year, were showcased as part of the grand opening Thursday of the Georgia BioScience Training Center.



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[Georgia Quick Start executive Marla Lowe \(left\) gives a tour of the Georgia BioScience Training Center near Social Circle](#)

Taxpayers financed the \$14 million training center as an incentive to help Georgia land Baxalta and its expected 1,500 high-paying jobs, and state leaders say it will also help woo other pharmaceutical and life sciences firms.

“This is the beginning of a new era in Georgia, to say to the world and to the pharmaceutical industry and others that Georgia is friendly to bioscience,” Gov. Nathan Deal said.

The training center also reflects an escalating bidding war for companies. Georgia hasn’t been shy about forking over tax breaks, land and free training for workers. State-of-the-art training centers have recently joined the state’s arsenal of perks.



+ **The \$14 million Georgia BioScience Training Center near Social Circle will train workers at the Baxalta pharmaceutical plant nearby**

The facilities aren’t just giveaways to single companies, state leaders say.

Georgia built a training center near the Kia Motors plant in West Point, and the facility has also been used to train waves of workers at other auto-related companies. Athens Technical College devoted a building largely to Caterpillar, which announced a plant and 1,400 new jobs near Athens in 2012. That building could be adapted to serve other manufacturers.

The state also included a new manufacturing training facility near Savannah in its pitch for Volvo. Though Volvo picked South Carolina for its factory and up to 4,000 jobs, the training center will move forward.

Chris Carr, the state’s economic development commissioner, said the Pooler training site will be used to help existing heavy manufacturers such as Gulfstream and JCB staff up. And it will be ready when others come calling.

“There is no better investment that you can make for the future of the state than in your workforce,” Carr said. “It’s infrastructure like anything else.”

New jobs, at a price



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The Baxalta plant near Social Circle is one of Gov. Nathan Deal's biggest economic development projects since he took office

When Georgia landed Baxalta (formerly part of Baxter International) in 2012, it was an economic highlight for a state suffering from high unemployment and a real estate collapse. The recruitment came at a price: a local and state incentive package valued at more than \$210 million, including the training center.

Training centers such as Georgia's new bioscience facility are "a positive move back to the future," said Brent Lane, director of the Carolina Center for Competitive Economies at the University of North Carolina. Rather than just battling with incentives, he said Georgia is trying to gain a workforce edge.

Finding skilled workers is still the No. 1 issue for most companies looking to expand, Lane said.



+ **Gretchen Corbin, commissioner of the Technical College System of Georgia (left), Gov. Nathan Deal, Baxalta Senior Vice President John Furey, state economic development chief Chris Carr and Baxalta Executive Vice President Jacopo Leonardi cut a ribbon**

“This is a return to the fundamentals of economic development competition,” he said.

Greg LeRoy, who heads Good Jobs First, a left-leaning think tank that analyzes incentive programs, said “there has been a surge” in states offering custom training to prospects.

“It is good that training dollars are being spent on jobs that are really materializing (and hopefully good jobs) as opposed to cookie-cutter training that is not closely aligned with the labor market,” LeRoy said in an email.



+ **Ken Bowser, a Georgia Quick Start training coordinator, demonstrates the use of a machine that fills vials of medicine**

But he added, “On the other hand, if the jobs are already coming for sure, the training can basically become a huge (human resources) subsidy that isn’t really leveraging anything.”

States also could require that companies enact preferences for disadvantaged workers, displaced workers or veterans as part of providing such specialized incentives, he said.

Quick Start praised



Quick Start staff members suited up in protective gear to demonstrate the training stations

John Boyd, a site consultant with the Boyd Company in New Jersey, said Georgia has long been “ahead of the curve” in job training. Georgia’s Quick Start workforce training program, which has been offered for decades, has been among the most highly-regarded in the nation, offering free customized training to workers of top prospects.

But Georgia has lost out in years past to the Research Triangle in North Carolina, Boston and the Bay Area in California in efforts to attract medical technology and bioscience firms, as those jobs have leaked out of New Jersey and some other states.

Georgia is smart to invest in its workforce, Boyd said. And Georgia has key bioscience assets, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Emory University.



+ **New Baxalta hires train within a lab at the new Georgia BioScience Training Center near Social Circle**

“Georgia has been the bride’s maid often in that sector and doesn’t want to be the bride’s maid moving forward,” Boyd said.

A training facility that could suit multiple prospects is an expense more palatable to many legislators, he added.

At its Georgia plant, Baxalta will make plasma-based treatments for patients with immune deficiencies, including its Gammagard product. The treatment takes antibodies from healthy people and replaces what’s missing in patients with weak immune systems.

Manufacturing the treatments is highly specialized and must be done in a contaminant-free environment. The firm has hired more than 300 workers so far, the state said. The plant is expected to start commercial production in 2018.