



ACE
alternatives for
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Safety Net

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Community Rallies Against Proposed South End Bio-terror Lab

Protestors cite lack of economic benefits and City give-away of land

[Boston, MA] Today, a coalition of residents and community leaders rallied and marched against a proposed bio-terror laboratory in the South End. Protestors started in Dudley Square Roxbury and marched to Boston University Medical Center, which is seeking federal funds to build the high security lab. Last month, the coalition sent a letter to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) asking the federal agency to disqualify BU's proposal for the lab until BU provided a meaningful public review process, particularly to address health and safety risks. Today, residents again demanded accountability from BU and cited the lack of economic and community benefits of the project. They also revealed City of Boston plans to buy a key parcel of land from the State and give it to BU Medical Center for the development of this facility.

BU is a finalist in competing for federal research and construction funds that could amount to \$1.6 billion in the coming years. There are currently only five Biosafety Level 4 (BL4) labs in the US. These are the highest security research labs that study the most dangerous biological weapons agents, including anthrax, smallpox, and the plague. If successful, the BU proposal would be the first such lab to be cited in the heart of an urban neighborhood.

Through internal memos obtained from the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) and the Romney administration, coalition members discovered that the City of Boston is planning to pay the state \$1,239,090 for Parcel Q and Q-1 and then give these parcel Q to BU to build a parking garage for the biolab. According to the BRA, the City is forgoing the sale of these parcels, valued at \$4.5 million, as a contribution to the BU initiative. Donovan Walker, Co-Chair of the Safety Net, stated "This is a community economic injustice. A \$1.6 billion project and where is the community's 10%? The Mayor demands developers to contribute 10% affordability in new housing developments. In this case, the Mayor's giving away money, giving away land, and giving away the community."

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“How can we be giving away public land and money for this bioterror lab when at the same time budget cuts are slashing health care, education, and housing? The real terrorism against our community is the closing of health clinics and schools and people becoming homeless,” said Klare Allen, an ACE community organizer.

Coalition members doubt that significant economic or other community benefits will be generated by the biolab for local residents. According to a 1991 report, only 5% of bio-medical research-related jobs are open to those with only a high school diploma and no prior experience. (“Boston: A Biomedical Frontier, Hype or Hope?” by Eswaran Selvarajah, South End Neighborhood Action Program of ABCD, November 26, 1991). The security requirements of the facility will also limit opportunities to develop commercial activities at the site (e.g. retail, office, childcare, hotel) that might bring more jobs for area residents.

BU continues to state that there will be no classified research conducted at the lab. They also say that there will be no use of recombinant DNA (RDNA) technology at the lab, which would be prohibited by Boston Public Health Commission regulations. According to the federal request for proposals, NIH is only choosing who gets to construct the facility. It will hold an additional bidding process to determine who will operate the lab. Also, NIH will have a 20-year right to require the lab to perform research it wants to have done, including research using RDNA. “BU is making a number of promises it simply can’t keep. They have not been up front about what they can and can’t control over future activities at the proposed lab,” says ACE executive director Penn Loh.

Another concern raised by the coalition is potential lack of public information about lab activities. A 2002 federal law on bioterrorism preparedness prohibits federal officials from disclosing what biological agents and toxins are used in or transported to a BL4 lab. It even prohibits the disclosure of a release, theft, or loss of an agent or toxin. Only the Secretary of Health and Human Services has the authority to determine if a release poses a health threat and notify local and state officials.

The coalition continues to build momentum towards a Boston City Council Hearing on an ordinance proposed by Chuck Turner that would prohibit BL4 research in Boston. The hearing is scheduled for August 12. “It’s time for the Council to stand up for the interests of the people of Boston and pass the proposed ordinance banning biolevel 4 labs in Boston,” said Turner.

The rally and march was organized by Alternatives for Community & Environment (ACE) and the Safety Net. ACE is a Roxbury-based environmental justice group working to build the power of lower income communities and communities of color to promote healthy, sustainable, and equitable communities (www.ace-ej.org). Safety Net, an organizing project of ACE, brings together Roxbury residents to advocate for sustainable and equitable development.

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