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Kionix high-speed bird flu test could create county jobs

By Tim Ashmore
Special to The Journal

Kionix Inc. announced today that it will enter a partnership with New York state to develop a rapid test for avian influenza, commonly known as bird flu.

The local company, a designer and maker of microelectromechanical devices, will use a \$250,000 state grant and other economic development incentives to hire staff and open new production facilities.

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Kionix developed the diagnostic device for point-of-use detection of avian influenza that takes less than an hour, according to company officials. A good portion of the technology, known as microfluidics, was developed at Cornell University and Penn State before it was purchased by Kionix.

According to Jeanette Shady, the director of external communications for Kionix, Gov. George Pataki predicts that the grant will help Kionix create around 150 jobs as the microfluidics technology matures. But Shady also emphasized that it won't be Kionix specifically creating the jobs, it will be microfluidics' growth. The company, located at 36 Thornwood Drive, will also seek significant

private-sector investment to move from research to commercial production.

"One of the keys to preventing the avian flu (if it hits) is fast detection. Right now the diagnostics available have to be taken back to a lab to be tested; the microfluidics technology can be tested on the spot," Shady said.

Avian flu has become a public-health problem in much of East Asia and has spread to other parts of Asia and to Europe and Africa, apparently because of bird migration and legal and illegal bird trade. Though it hasn't created a major human epidemic, there is concern among public-health authorities that the virus could mutate into a form that could spread rapidly among humans. It also could potentially greatly damage the poultry industry and harm wild bird populations.

New York state has a particular interest in early detection and control of avian influenza given its very large live bird markets in New York City and its position in the Atlantic flyway for migratory birds.

"This new chip-based technique has the potential to address the immediate public health threat of avian influenza, but also is an excellent technology platform for numerous diagnostics of use in agriculture, animal health and human health," Kionix President and CEO Gregory J. Galvin said. "We are extremely pleased to be collaborating with New York state, Cornell University and Pennsylvania State University to bring this product into general availability as rapidly as possible."

State Sen. Michael Nozzolio, R-54th Dist., lauded Kionix for planning to do the work locally.

"Kionix could have placed its new microfluidics business anywhere in the country, and in fact was

heavily recruited by other states and counties,” he said in a press release. “I am very pleased they elected to remain in Tompkins County. Moreover, I am excited to see such a successful collaboration among the public sector, a major research university and the private sector leading to a valuable tool in our fight against a serious threat to the people of New York.”

“Ithaca offers a very highly educated population here, and we can recruit talent easily,” Shady said. “With Cornell and Ithaca College, not only is it easy to recruit workers, but it's also easy to retain people, and I think that's a result of the community.”

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