

Jackson Lab biomedical research and Ave Maria as neighbors. Can they co-exist?

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Saturday, April 10, 2010

AVE MARIA — Ave Maria University's newest neighbor may be one in the business of saving lives.

While its mission is clear, its means toward accomplishing that mission still are being unraveled by residents of Collier County and those surrounding the small conservative university — specifically, whether the nonprofit biomedical group conducts the type of research considered contrary to Catholic doctrine.

Maine-based The Jackson Laboratory is working out the details and seeking state support to build a research complex on roughly 50 acres southwest of Ave Maria town and university.

"If they were to locate here I think there would be very considerable benefits to the entire area," said Nicholas Healy, president of Ave Maria University. "They will bring well-paying jobs and so on. It will help real estate in the town."

While officials with the nonprofit lab group say they don't perform research with embryonic stem cells, the foundation's Web site advertises workshops and conferences educating other scientists on the use of stem cells for research. Embryonic stem cells are derived from the earliest stage of human life, just a few days after an egg is fertilized, and usually are harvested from embryos left over after in vitro fertilization treatment.

"Obviously, there are issues that arise whenever you hear the term 'biomedical research,'" Healy said. "Some people have concerns over that. From what we have been told, Jackson labs does not do human embryonic stem cell research, which from the point of view of Catholic moral teaching, would be problematic (if they did)."

Catholic doctrine opposes the use of embryonic stem cells for research, because Catholic Church teachings state that any organism with the potential for human life should be given a natural opportunity to fully develop.

Healy said he doesn't have a problem with Jackson's involvement in education on stem cell research.

“There is nothing wrong with having seminars or workshops,” he said. “We could have a seminar here on it. The Catholic Church is not afraid to engage issues in science and technology.”

The Jackson Lab focuses on decoding human DNA to identify traits that could tip doctors off to diseases like cancer or diabetes, and help lead to personalized treatments based on an individual's unique genetic makeup. Researchers at Jackson primarily use mice as models.

“Our work is about discovering the genetic basis of health and disease, and what we're about is trying to find ways to make people healthier,” said Michael Hyde, vice president for advancement at Jackson. “We're about trying to cure diseases. I have no idea what the neighbors might think. I can only tell you here in Maine, the vast majority of people would say great things about The Jackson Laboratory. We take great pride in being great neighbors.”

But the lab is realistic in understanding the organization may not have all of the same world views as its potential neighbor, Jackson Vice President Charles Hewett said.

“There are probably some philosophical differences that will emerge,” Hewett said. “We certainly are very thoughtful about the subject, but not willing to rule out doing human embryonic stem cell research.”

Healy said he hopes the lab doesn't reach the point where it decides to use embryonic stem cells in research, but also said he would hope to have an open dialogue with the lab's leadership to explain the university's moral viewpoint if the need arises.

Those close to the university and the town of Ave Maria say they don't expect the research lab's involvement in stem cell research education to become an issue.

“They don't have anything to do with each other, the university and the research park,” said Blake Gable, president of real estate development with Barron Collier Cos., a developer in the town of Ave Maria, which would donate the land for Jackson's potential new lab. “They're completely independent of each other.”

The site for the lab would be a little more than a half-mile from Ave Maria Boulevard, the entrance to Ave Maria, Gable said. Eventually, his company hopes to use the surrounding 100 acres to expand the area into a research park.

Ave Maria University founder Tom Monaghan, a frequent contributor toward right-to-life and anti-abortion issues, is a partner with Barron Collier Cos., in the development of the town and surrounding lands. Gable said he went to Monaghan with the Jackson Laboratory proposal last year to get Monaghan's blessing on the project.

“Obviously, because Tom is our partner, when this opportunity was brought to our attention last year, we went to our partner and said, ‘This is what we want to do, is it something you’re comfortable with?’” Gable said. “He went and did his due diligence, researched it, and said, ‘Go ahead with it.’”

There is some curiosity at the university about the proposed laboratory, Healy said, but it is far too early to characterize the reaction there. Local news outlet The Ave Herald has published four stories on its Web site, aveherald.com, in the past two weeks about Jackson. The last two stories have focused on the proposed location of the new lab and the type of research performed by the nonprofit.

Gable said officials from Jackson, who were in Collier County to meet with community members and officials this past week, have been working tirelessly to educate the entire county — not just Ave Maria — about what they do.

Hyde said that in meetings with roughly 100 people in the last week, the issue of embryonic stem cell research came up “surprisingly little.”

The university would have no bearing on the lab’s activities anyway, Healy points out.

“We’re a university,” he said. “We don’t attempt to control what companies do — whether they’re neighbors or whether they’re in another part of the state. The whole approach of Catholic moral teaching, and in fact the entire faith, is to propose, not to impose.”

However, the moral code of the university has traditionally been reflected by the young town surrounding it. Since the town was established, retailers haven’t sold condoms. The town’s clinic doesn’t offer emergency contraceptives, abortions or the so-called morning-after pill.

However, the proposed site for the research lab would be outside the town’s borders, and just inside the Ave Maria Stewardship Community District.

Gable likened the proximity of the proposed research lab to Ave Maria University — about four miles — to the distance between the university and Seminole Casino Immokalee. People with qualms about gambling likely don’t feel threatened by way of living a few miles from a casino, he pointed out.

“There are a lot of people who live in Ave Maria,” Gable said. “You could probably interview 1,000 people and get 1,000 different responses.”

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