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## Controversial Covance testing lab moves in

By Ed Taylor  
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A massive and controversial drug testing laboratory is set to open in a couple of months after Chandler officials granted final approval to occupy the building.

Covance, a global corporation based in Princeton, N.J., has started moving equipment into the 280,000-square-foot complex at 2701 E. Ryan Road and expects to begin operations around the end of March, said spokeswoman Camilla Strongin.

The company is installing some 7,000 pieces of equipment, a process that will take several months.

"Because of the sophisticated nature of this equipment, they have to do validation studies and they have to get all of the regulatory approvals to begin work," she said. "This is a fairly detailed process."

The lab will provide drug-development services for major pharmaceutical firms, testing the toxicity of new compounds before they are used in humans.

Because the work involves animal testing, the \$150 million project has been strongly opposed by animal-rights activists who have protested at the construction site and appealed to public officials to keep the project from being built. They argue that the company will abuse animals, cause air and water pollution and increase the risk of public exposure to toxic chemicals and exotic diseases.

Soon after the company began construction in June 2007, the Washington, D.C.-based Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine filed a suit in Maricopa County Superior Court claiming the City Council held illegal closed-door meetings with Covance officials to discuss zoning for the site. Also the suit said Chandler officials violated state and city zoning laws by not providing adequate public notice of a Planning and Zoning Commission hearing on the project, and the city's zoning law does not provide for kennels and veterinary clinics in industrial zones.

For evidence of animal cruelty, opponents pointed to an undercover video filmed at a Covance facility in Virginia, which they said showed monkeys being abused. Also they said a monkey imported to Virginia by a Covance predecessor company in 1989 tested positive for the Ebola virus.

Mike Boerman, a member of Citizens Against Covance, a local group formed to oppose the project, said "Covance doesn't even deserve a business license, much less these construction (permits)."

The company originally planned to locate the lab at Price and Germann roads in the Price technology corridor but moved it to a 77-acre parcel at Gilbert and Ryan roads that was already zoned for industrial use to avoid a bruising zoning fight.

Also the physicians' lawsuit was dismissed by a Superior Court judge in February 2008, and the Arizona attorney general's office decided in May 2008 the city did not violate the state's Open Meeting Laws.

Strongin said animal testing is required by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration as part of the process to validate new drugs.

"Most people understand it is FDA mandated," she said. "You can't bring drugs to market without going through this route."

Strongin defended the company's animal-treatment record, saying "there is not a lot of facts behind the arguments" of animal rights activists. She said the company, which is one of the two largest drug-testing companies in the world, operates labs in locations such as Madison, Wis., which are noted for their strong environmental regulations.

The company has about 80 employees working in Chandler as it begins the move-in and will ramp up to 200 to 300 employees once work begins. The first phase covers only 27 acres of the 77-acre site, giving Covance plenty of room to expand. Officials have said the company could eventually conduct human clinical trials at the site and employ thousands.

The Chandler facility is intended to serve the company's clients on the West Coast. With biotech clusters in San Diego and the Pacific Northwest, it's logical to be located closer to customers, Strongin said.

"A trip to Madison is a three-day trip (for West Coast companies)," she said. "But from Chandler they can fly back (home) on the same day."

For Christine Mackey, Chandler's economic development director, the prospect of pharmaceutical executives showing up in town to visit Covance offers a golden opportunity to showcase the city. As a result, Covance could become an anchor attracting other firms to the city's fledgling biotech hub, she said.

"As they come in, it will give us a chance to put Chandler in front of them," she said.

Chandler currently has 15 biotech companies with a total of 650 employees, not including Covance.



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