

2 Champaign firms headed for finals in business competition

By Don Dodson

Sunday, November 16, 2008

CHAMPAIGN – Two Champaign-based businesses will be among 12 companies vying for top prizes of \$40,000 in the Innovate Illinois business competition Tuesday in Chicago.

Representatives of Autonomic Materials Inc. and Kim Laboratories will make presentations to a panel of judges in hopes of taking honors in the early-stage and later-stage categories, respectively.

The winner in each category will take home \$40,000, with the runners-up receiving \$10,000. The \$100,000 in prize money is provided by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, which is administering the competition jointly with the Chicagoland Entrepreneurial Center.

This year, 130 companies applied for the competition. Applications were reviewed, and the field was narrowed to 32. Semifinals were held Sept. 26 at the University of Chicago, with each business owner giving a five-minute, "fast-pitch" presentation to judges.

In the finals, each company will have five minutes for the presentation and five minutes for questions.

David Schlesinger, a senior research scientist for Kim Laboratories, plans to make that firm's presentation. He said he has "shortened it significantly" from the version he gave in the semifinals.

Company President Myung Kim said Kim Laboratories is focusing on two prospective products: a diagnostic testing kit for norovirus – the leading cause of gastroenteritis worldwide – and a disinfectant effective against norovirus.

Using the kit, hospitals can test a stool sample and tell within five to 10 minutes whether the person has norovirus.

"No one is selling a testing kit for norovirus right now," Kim said. Although some companies claim to have effective disinfectants against it, Kim said tests by his company indicate some of those disinfectants fall short of their claims.

Of the two prospective products, the disinfectant is likely to go to market first, with the testing kit coming later, Kim said. The disinfectant will need to be registered with the Environmental Protection Agency, and the kit will need Food and Drug Administration approval.

Kim said if his company wins money in the competition, it will probably be used to pay patent filing expenses.

Based in EnterpriseWorks, the University of Illinois' business incubator, Kim Laboratories has seven full-time and three part-time employees, Kim said.

Autonomic Materials, also based in EnterpriseWorks, is developing "self-healing" coatings for ships, oil rigs and other structures. Its new chief executive officer, Lamar "Larry" Evans, plans to make the presentation.

Evans said he intends to highlight the enormous drain that corrosion of materials has on the economy and how Autonomic Materials can help reduce that.

The company uses the techniques of "microencapsulation" and "microvascular materials systems" to distribute "self-healing" substances through coatings. Those enable coatings to be longer-lasting, so structures exposed to harsh marine environments won't have to be coated as often.

Autonomic Materials incorporated in 2005 and set up shop in EnterpriseWorks in the fall of 2007. It employs three people and has four varieties of "healing technologies" in different stages of development, Evans said. The company is discussing the scale-up of one of the varieties with prospective manufacturing partners.

"Response to the technology has been very encouraging, and customer visits to EnterpriseWorks are becoming routine," Evans said.

If Autonomic Materials wins, it has no shortage of things to do with the money, but high on the list will be making the marketplace aware of the technology and the company's capabilities, Evans said.

Each of the local companies faces five competitors in its category. Autonomic Materials will vie with Peoria-based Ag-Defense Systems, Murphysboro-based Clipius Technologies and three Chicago firms, Harrison Custom Harmonicas, SanoGene Therapeutics and Vesseltek BioMedical.

Competing with Kim Laboratories in the later-stage category will be: Springfield-based EVT, Wood River-based NICA Corp., South Beloit-based Balanced IT Solutions and two Chicago firms, CallPod Inc. and Salare Security.

Only one other firm from East Central Illinois made the field of 32 semifinalists. That was Comp Cost Solutions Cooperative Marketing Co. of Mattoon.

Last year, the competition was set up differently, with 13 winners and \$10,000 in prize money for each winner. There were three winners from central Illinois, with one of them, Vision Technology Inc., from Champaign-Urbana. That company develops advanced cameras.