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Speaker highlights Shreveport's biotechnology industry

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Franz Hefti compared Shreveport's biotechnology and pharmaceutical industry to the local movie industry during the Biomedical Research Foundation of Northwest Louisiana's annual meeting Thursday.

Hefti, chief scientific officer of the biotech company Avid Radiopharmaceuticals in Philadelphia, was the keynote speaker for the event at Sam's Town Casino.

"The movie industry makes many movies. Most are actually financial failures," he said. "Occasionally, a really big hit comes around that pays for all those failures."

The biopharmaceutical industry is the same way, he said, one breakthrough makes up for all the failures.

"The other similarity is no one can predict which (movies) will be blockbusters," Hefti added. "We live with that kind of uncertainty."

As long as the movie industry continues to stay and grow in Shreveport then there is hope for the biotechnology field, he said.

The Biomedical Research Foundation was established in 1986. Since then, the foundation has grown to include a PET imaging center, the InterTech Science Park and several other biotechnology initiatives. It also has partnered with local universities and the public school system to increase research and educational opportunities.

Many people believe growth and success in the biotechnology industry is contained to big metropolitan areas such as California's bay area and Boston, Hefti said.

"They think there is no life besides these major metropolitan biotech centers," he said. "The movie industry has moved to Shreveport, so there is life outside of Hollywood. We need these big places, but you can be successful in the periphery of the big places."

Hefti listed must-haves for an area to be successful in biotechnology.

- A "modern, forward-looking academic institution that generates innovations, intellectual property and also trains people for the industry."
- "Mechanisms that encourage the generation of technology in universities" as well as enthusiasm in faculty to "actually think about and form spinout companies."
- A local investor community dedicated to build up local industry.

Shreveport has all three, he said, adding LSU Health Sciences Center is one of the state's premiere medical schools with a very active research faculty. He also noted the presence of "spin-out companies," like Embera Neurotherapeutics.

"(Embera) is doing clinical trials on a new type of drug for addiction," he said. "There is also a collaboration Avid Radiopharmaceuticals has established with the PET Imaging Center."

Shreveport also has a solid local investor community, which is the third key ingredient, Hefti added.

"I believe there is significant potential here in Shreveport to achieve (success)."