

SMALL TOWN IMPACT

THE MED TECH CLUSTER IN OWEN COUNTY

When thinking of Indiana's life sciences meccas, attention turns first to Indianapolis or the university communities. But perhaps no where in the state does the industry play a bigger role in the local economy than in Spencer.

The west central Indiana town of approximately 3,000 is home to three medical device manufacturers: Boston Scientific, Cook Urological and Medical Polymers.

How these companies came to reside there can be traced back several decades to two area entrepreneurs.

In 1977, Bill Cook, who had already founded Cook Medical in Bloomington, established Cook Urological in Spencer. Four years later, Jim Vance started Van-Tec, which introduced a pigtail stent for urological procedures. Then in 1988, Vance sold the business to Boston Scientific, and later started another venture called Medical Polymers.

It was the entrance of Boston Scientific that has made a profound impression on the landscape, maintains Denise Shaw, a Spencer native and executive director of the Owen County Chamber of Commerce/Economic Development Corporation.

"Boston Scientific is a multi-million-dollar corporation and they bring a much bigger picture into this town than I think anyone ever imagined could happen," she says. "The facility in Spencer is one of their leading facilities in the endosurgery (minimally invasive surgery) area. It also manufactures more types of products than any of their manufacturing facilities across the United States and even worldwide."

The Boston Scientific workforce comes from a broad region – pulling employees from 17 counties. "They are busting at the seams, employing upwards of 1,200 people right now," Shaw states.

"The upper level management, the more urbanized employees, live outside of Spencer. The grassroots workforce is primarily women and what they do is very intricate. When they hire

individuals to work on the line, they are looking for people who can handle basically a needle and thread. That's why they employ a lot of women."

The second largest of the area's med tech companies, Cook Urological, employs over 300 people. Medical Polymers, which is privately owned, has about 30 workers.

"Together, these three businesses represent close to 1,600 jobs for Spencer. No company or industry group comes close to that. I would venture to say that at least 75% of the local jobs come from these three," Shaw surmises.

She also notes that all have been active in giving back to the community, but Boston Scientific more so. "Boston Scientific has an employee on staff that all he does is community relations, and he serves on several different non-profit organization boards."

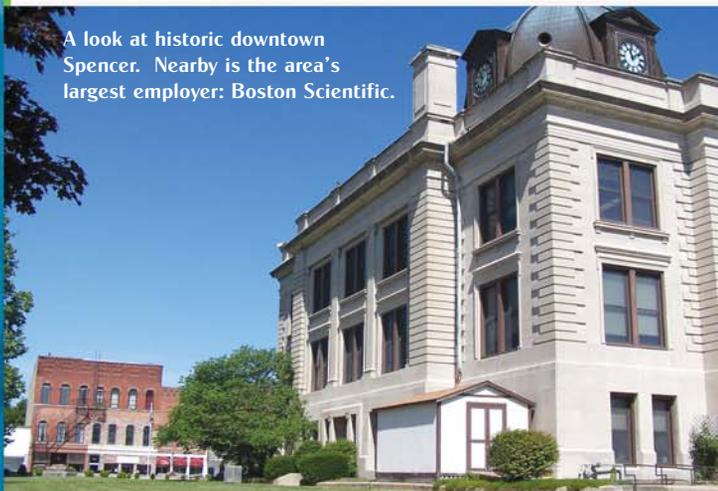
While Shaw admits, "We would love to attract a few more med tech companies that would be a support to our existing ones," her main focus is on the present.

Medical Polymers is in a transition period. Both founder Jim Vance and his son have passed away; the son just in May. "I'm not sure what the future of that company is going to be, but I hope they continue on here and will do what I can to make that happen," Shaw offers.

When asked what Boston Scientific and Cook Urological mean to the survival of the community, Shaw says it's hard to even put into words. "We've come to rely very heavily on them. ... It's a dog-eat-dog world out there. I know there are a lot of communities who would love to have a Boston Scientific or a Cook Urological lab in their backyard. ... We are literally working and striving daily to see to it that they stay here."

INFORMATION LINK

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A look at historic downtown Spencer. Nearby is the area's largest employer: Boston Scientific.

