Somerville site sacked
DNA firm cancels plans for local plant

By Richard Salz
Genentech has cancelled its plans to open a plant in Somerville. The firm had applied to the city for a building renovation in November. According to city officials, the firm explained to the city that it would be using recombinant DNA technology to produce interferon, a suspected cancer-fighting agent. The firm would also be doing other work related to seeking a cure for cancer.

Mark Ptashne, chairman of the molecular biology department at Harvard University, is one of the principalists of Genentech. Ptashne has been very close-mouthed about the firm's plans all along, refusing to give any sort of time-line as to when the plans would become public. Last month's Board of Aldermen meeting.

Ptashne refused to comment about the cancellation, noting only that the firm had decided not to go ahead with the opening "at this time."

Last October, Harvard considered setting up a company to exploit the University's expertise in recombinant DNA technology, commonly called "gene splicing." The proposal was unique because it marked the first time a university would be taking an active role in the development of a commercial venture. Ptashne was to have played an important role in the proposed company.

Cambridge has been interested in recombinant DNA technology for several years, and is the only city in the country to have set up guidelines regulating such work on the educational field. Last week, the Cambridge Biohazards Commit-tee recommended to the City Council that Cambridge set up similar guidelines for large-scale commercial DNA work. The Committee's report mentioned that any large-scale work should be done in Cambridge because nearby cities have no guidelines regulating recombinant DNA technology.

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