

PBL Problem - The proposed BU Biosafety Lab (BSL4)

1) In a paragraph describe the problem.

Boston University has been awarded a \$120 million grant to build a Biosafety Level 4 laboratory near the BU Medical Center in Roxbury, which BU officials say could bring in up to \$1.7 billion total in research and construction grants. The National Institutes of Health grant will be used to build a facility that performs research on many infectious diseases and specializes in rapid translation of research to be used for vaccines or treatments, according to Assistant Provost of Research Mark Klempner. Klempner said the facility will work with some of the “scariest” agents imaginable, including anthrax, hemorrhagic fever, Ebola and smallpox. Donovan Walker, a Roxbury resident and co-chair of Safety Net — a community group opposing the lab’s construction — said he thinks it will bring an increase in health issues. Roxbury community activists plan on doing as much as they can to either stop the lab from being built or to get as much information about the project as possible from BU, according to Klare Allen, co-chair of Alternatives for Community and Environment, another group opposed to the lab.

2) State why you think this is an important problem.

Several issues are raised by this problem: 1) Has BU acted in good faith in terms of making full disclosure of the benefits and risks of this project? 2) Should potentially dangerous facilities be built in densely populated urban areas? 3) How much weight does adverse community input have in making such a decision? 4) What is known about the potential for these biological agents to escape into the community? Will proper safeguards be in place and what are they?

3) List some of the things you know about the problem.

The Boston Redevelopment Authority Board gave final approval to the Boston University Medical Center for the construction of a controversial biomedical research facility located in the South End that will include a Biosafety Level 4 laboratory, according to a Dec. 15 press release. *BU Daily Press article 1/18/05*

City Councilors lambasted Boston University yesterday for its "irresponsible behavior" regarding its Biosafety Level 4 laboratory, citing that since 2000, the university has violated 80 state health regulations. *BU Daily Press article 1/27/05*

The National Institutes of Health expects within a month to issue a revised environmental impact statement on a proposed high-security laboratory at Boston University where scientists would study the world's deadliest germs and viruses, a federal official said yesterday. *Boston Globe 2/5/05*

4) Comment on what makes the problem unclear.

There are a number of community groups that have formed to oppose this biolab: Safety Net, a tenant’s rights group, and Alternatives for Community and Environment, which have information and claims that conflict with the announcements made by BU.

5) Whose problem is it? Who might be invested (as a stakeholders) in wanting to find solution(s) to the problem?

Stakeholders who might be interested in finding a solution to this problem are: 1) Roxbury and South End communities; 2) BU; 3) the Mayor's office and City Council; 4) the NIH; 5) the biotech industry in MA; 6) the U.S. government; 7) environmental watchdog and other advocacy orgs.