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Detrick opponents call for end to growth

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News-Post Staff

FORT DETRICK -- Backed by a sprawling white sheet marked with "Bioweapons: Not here, not anywhere" and a painting of the planet, local protesters called for an end to planned growth at Fort Detrick.

The post is preparing for completion of a biodefense research campus. Some opponents cite the danger of biological agents escaping laboratories and sickening city residents. Others reference the cost of federal biological defense research, saying the money could be spent better better on more pressing public health problems.

Still others say the line between offensive and defense biological research is blurred, and research in U.S. laboratories could spark an international bioweapons race.

Personal reasons for opponents' push to stop growth on the Frederick post are myriad. Their goal is unanimous.

Steve Kurtz of Critical Art Ensemble traveled from his home in Buffalo, N.Y., to participate in Saturday's demonstration. The ensemble is a group of five artists who draw attention to peace-related issues that have been overlooked during advocates' focus on the war, he said.

Kurtz said the government's spending of billions on biodefense research is a militarization of civilian public health, and money should be spent on diseases such as AIDS and tuberculosis, not anthrax.

"It's not that it might happen or that it could happen -- millions are going to die and are dying," Kurtz said. "We're talking millions of lives on the table. That's a real holocaust, the real weapons of mass



Photo by Skip Lawrence

Steve Kurtz of the group Critical Art Ensemble emphasizes a point Saturday during a rally protesting expansion at Fort Detrick.

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destruction."

Fort Detrick's \$1.2 billion biomedical research and biological defense campus is expected to add 1,200 jobs on post by 2010 and later. Several laboratories being built in the National Interagency Biodefense Campus will work with the most dangerous classification of biological agents.

The campus will hold a Department of Homeland Security laboratory that will assess threat vulnerabilities and analyze evidence from terrorism and biological attacks. The \$128 million National Biodefense Analysis and Countermeasures Center is scheduled to begin operating in 2008.

The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases' Integrated Research Facility is scheduled to be completed in 2008 and cost \$105 million.

The Army is planning to build a two-stage addition to its existing biodefense laboratory, the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases.

The Army plans to re-use about 200,000 square feet of existing laboratory space. The first phase of USAMRIID construction is expected to end in 2012, with the second stage ending in 2016.

About 75 people attended Saturday's demonstration, which was organized by the Frederick Progressive Action Coalition. The event included speakers, a poetry reading and music performances to share information about the opposition movement and build unity.

Dena Briscoe of Clinton attended the rally. Briscoe is president of Brentwood Exposed, an advocacy group for workers who were working in Washington's Brentwood post office during the 2001 anthrax attacks. Two employees died after the office processed an anthrax-filled letter sent to Capitol Hill.

Briscoe was one of several workers hospitalized after the attacks and has spoken out against the federal government's handling of the crisis in the nearly six years that have passed. She said she believes the anthrax spores that killed her colleagues were created at Fort Detrick.

"I have a closeness to, a concern about them expanding their programs," Briscoe said. "We're hoping we'll have less of this, not more."

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