SARANAC LAKE — An effort by Trudeau Institute to develop rapid COVID-19 testing may be underway.

A member of Trudeau Institute’s board of trustees, Konrad “Kip” Testwuide, hinted at the possibility of a new rapid-testing initiative — where results from COVID-19 tests could be processed within 24 hours — during a virtual meeting hosted by the Saranac Lake Area Chamber of Commerce last week.

“I think we have to think ahead, and plan for this, and see if we can get behind an effort to support a rapid-testing initiative,” Testwuide said.

Trudeau Institute is a biomedical research facility. It was built upon studying infectious diseases of the lungs, and its longtime hometown, Saranac Lake, is known for fostering innovation in the field of public health.

It wasn’t clear what role, if any, Trudeau Institute would play in the fight against COVID-19 earlier this year as researchers around the world started studying coronaviruses — which have been known since the 1960s, this current iteration being the seventh coronavirus, according to Trudeau Institute President Dr. Atsuo Kuki.

Two teams at Trudeau are now working on COVID-19 in one way or another. One group is focusing on both influenza and the coronavirus. Another group, which initially focused on influenza and Zika, shifted about 90% of its operations to focus on a vaccine for COVID-19. A third team remains focused on tuberculosis, which continues to be Earth’s most deadly disease, killing 1.5 million people in 2018, according to the World Health Organization.
The institute also continues to help Adirondack Health, both by sterilizing N-95 masks used by its staff and by manufacturing the chemicals used to transport COVID-19 test samples, which was in short supply.

Though the hospital now has access to a stable source of these chemical reagents, not everyone tested is getting their results back quickly.

“The vials that are provided have to go a long way to be tested and often run into bottlenecks if there’s an extreme outbreak somewhere else,” Testwuide said last Monday. “To have rapid-response testing, I think, is our next step to building confidence in the area.

“There is a plan underway to achieve this with this alliance that was explained,” he added, referring to a new “leadership alliance” that includes Champlain Valley Physician’s Hospital President Michelle LeBeau, North Country Chamber of Commerce President Garry Douglas, former congressman Bill Owens, and representatives of both Trudeau Institute and Adirondack Health.

Testwuide told attendees of the Saranac Lake chamber’s meeting that the institute would “love to have business support for a much more rapid testing response facility.”

Testwuide did not respond to multiple requests for more information following the meeting. The president of Trudeau Institute’s board of trustees, Dr. Dorothy Federman, deferred to Testwuide on the details of the initiative.