BRIDGETON -- Construction of the Rutgers Food Innovation Center's incubator facility is expected to get under way here next month.

The construction contract for the facility was awarded to Vineland's Stanker & Galetto on Monday, according to Food Innovation Center (FIC) Director Lou Cooperhouse, who expects work to begin on the site within two weeks.

The city sold the industrial-park land to the FIC for $90,000 earlier this year.

It will cost the FIC $7.65 million just to build its 23,000-square-foot incubator facility, which will be located on a 6-acre lot in the city's new Florida Avenue Industrial Park.

Thanks to U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo's efforts, the FIC will immediately be able to begin outfitting its new facility with food-processing equipment upon its completion.

The 2nd District congressman announced Thursday a $90,000 grant through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Rural Development program for the much-needed equipment.

"Today's announcement is certainly welcome news for both the Rutgers Food Innovation Center and the City of Bridgeton," LoBiondo (R) said in a press release. "Promising to create new jobs and opportunities for our farmers, this project will inject a critical boost to the local economy."

The $90,000 grant is a sign LoBiondo plans to continue to offer his support of the FIC incubator, for which he previously was instrumental in obtaining $4 million in funding -- $2 million for planning and development through USDA and $2 million for construction through the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA).

"We are extremely appreciative of this grant from USDA Rural Development, and the tremendous support from Congressman LoBiondo that will enable our Rutgers Food Innovation Center to purchase some of the critically needed food-processing equipment that is required for our food-business incubator facility in Bridgeton," Cooperhouse said in the press release.

The incubator facility will provide unprecedented opportunities for the area's farmers, agricultural cooperatives, food-business entrepreneurs, and existing small and mid-sized food companies by offering access to state-of-the-art processing equipment, technical and business support, and educational opportunities.

Even without an incubator facility to call home, the FIC was named Business Incubator of the Year by the National Business Incubation Association in April at the association's annual conference, held in Seattle, Wash.

The FIC, which has been working out of an office on East Commerce Street in the city's downtown for more than five years now, has been providing assistance to New Jersey Ethanol LLC, Cooperhouse said.

New Jersey Ethanol on Wednesday night was granted preliminary approval by the city planning board for its proposed ethanol plant off South Burlington Road. The FIC is aiding the group in finding agricultural-waste sources to produce its ethanol.

After EDA awarded FIC $2 million last May, Cooperhouse and FIC officials proclaimed they were done raising funds for the incubator's construction, having raised $7.4 million to that point.

In addition to the $2 million from EDA, the FIC had received $2 million from the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority, $1.8 million from the state, $750,000 from the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, $500,000 from the Cumberland Empowerment Zone and $350,000 from the city.
But the incubator facility's construction cost came in at $7.65 million.

The Empowerment Zone stepped up and provided the additional $250,000 needed for the FIC to get its facility built, Cooperhouse said, crediting Mayor Jim Begley for his support in obtaining the final funding piece.

The FIC is an economic development outreach center of Rutgers University and a part of the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station.