Rutgers Food Innovation Center feted

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By SEAN C. McCULLEN
Staff Writer

BRIDGETON -- The city-based Rutgers Food Innovation Center was named the National Business Incubation Association's (NBIA) Incubator of the Year in the services and manufacturing category earlier this week.

The award was announced at NBIA's 21st International Conference on Business Incubation, held this year in Seattle, Wash.

The Food Innovation Center is an economic development program and business incubator of Rutgers University's New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station. It offers business and technical expertise to farmers, agricultural cooperatives, food business entrepreneurs, small and mid-sized, established food companies, and retail and food-service operations which promote locally sourced food products.

Director Lou Cooperhouse accepted the award on behalf of the Food Innovation Center during a luncheon attended by 600 of his peers from 40 countries around the world.

"We are extremely grateful for the vision of Rutgers University and the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station that has enabled this to occur," Cooperhouse said as he accepted the award. "We are pleased that we have been able to assist over 700 food and agriculture entrepreneurs, located in every county of our state, from our modest 2,700-square-foot offices in Bridgeton, New Jersey."

And the center has aided those hundreds of businesses without its long-awaited 23,000-square-foot food-business incubator facility. Center officials expect construction of the facility to get under way sometime this spring, according to Cooperhouse.

The incubator facility, which will be built in the city's still-vacant Florida Avenue Industrial Park, will offer shared-use food processing space and on-site analytical, technological, marketing, and educational support services -- space and services the Food Innovation Center currently cannot offer.

"Once the incubator facility is completed, which we anticipate will occur in the spring of 2008, these services will all be located under one roof," Food Innovation Center associate director Margaret Brennan said, "and we will be able to make considerably greater impacts to our clients and to the economy of New Jersey."

Cooperhouse on Thursday credited Assemblyman Doug Fisher (D-3, Bridgeton) for his continuing support of the Food Innovation Center.

The assemblyman pointed to the NBIA award as evidence that he and his Third District colleagues, state Sen. Stephen Sweeney and Assemblyman John Burzichelli, have been supporting a winning program.

"It speaks to how much they've accomplished without even having the actual incubator facility up and running," Fisher said. "While it's taken several years to get where we are now, getting this award is going to help us in making sure we get all the additional monies needed to really make this thing fly, which it is going to.

"For Bridgeton and Cumberland County, particularly, this is a major facility that is going to reap tremendous dividends throughout the entire region, really the entire state."

The Food Innovation Center estimates the incubator facility will create more than 1,000 net new jobs and more than $200 million in cumulative new revenue for its clients, in addition to millions of dollars in local tax revenue. It is also anticipated the center's workforce development programs at the incubator facility will assist in the retention of higher-paying jobs in the community and region, Cooperhouse said.

The center has received funding toward its incubator facility and for operating expenses from the following sources: Rutgers' New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station; the U.S. Department of Agriculture; the U.S. Economic Development Administration; the State of New Jersey; the New Jersey Casino Reinvestment Development Authority; the state Commission on Science and Technology; the Cumberland Empowerment Zone; and the City of Bridgeton.
NBIA’s other Incubator of the Year, in the technology category, was awarded to the Montpellier Business and Innovation Center, of Monpellier, France. The French incubator has a 95,000-square-foot facility and has graduated more than 370 companies since its inception in 1987.