Progress grows for food center
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BRIDGETON

Rutgers University broke ground Monday for its $7.4 million Rutgers Food Innovation Center here, a hub designed to help new and existing companies make, process, package and market new food products.

The 23,000-square-foot facility on Route 49 will house technical and business support services and provide a center for distance learning and continuing education, according to Louis Cooperhouse, director.

For companies that need it, the center will offer a state-of-the-art, shared-use food-processing facility for research and manufacturing.

According to Cooperhouse, expected outgrowths of the center include thousands of new jobs and $200 million in cumulative revenue by the year 2010.

Another goal is the preservation of New Jersey farmland by providing new outlets for state-grown products, Cooperhouse said. Food and agriculture is the state's second largest consumer goods industry.

On Monday, 90 state food manufacturers, farmers and government leaders celebrated the groundbreaking with speeches -- and of course, food. Twenty-three New Jersey companies displayed their products and offered them as part of a buffet lunch.

Even without a designated food innovation facility, Rutgers has served 500 business clients since 2003, more than 90 percent of them farmers or small startup companies.

One Rutgers client, Marcia M. Blackwell of Long Branch, chatted with guests Monday as she gave out samples of her chocolate, mango and strawberry sorbets. Her company, Blackwell Organic, which also makes gelato, went commercial about a year ago and now sells in 30 stores.
"The food innovation center helped us every step of the way," Blackwell said.

In addition to state-based startup companies, the innovation center is also drawing foreign investment, according to Mayor Michael Pirolli of Bridgeton, who spoke during the event.

OrganiTECH, a company from Israel, has purchased six acres in Bridgeton, said Pirolli. The company hopes to seek the innovation center's support as it grows green leafy vegetables year-round in seven hydroponic greenhouses. The product will be distributed along the East Coast.

Construction of the innovation center is being funded by a series of grants from federal, state and local governments. Building will begin in October with a completion date in late 2007. The center has been designed by J.C. Pedersen Architect.

The last piece of funding for the project, a $2 million grant from the U.S. Economic Development Administration, was recently announced.

"The $2 million is the largest investment we are going to make in the Philadelphia region this year," according to Paul Raetsch, regional director of the development administration who spoke at Monday's event. "We call our grants "investments' because we expect dividends."

Raetsch said economic growth is promoted through three ideals: innovation, entrepreneurship and regionalism -- all incorporated within the Rutgers Food Innovation Center concept.

During the groundbreaking, political and government leaders celebrated their partnership across party lines to make funding available for the center's construction.

"This is the way things are supposed to work," said Leonard Desiderio, chairman of the South Jersey Economic Development District, lauding the joint effort.

The center will be built using the following funds: $2 million from the U.S. Economic Development Administration, $2 million from the New Jersey Casino Reinvestment Development Authority, $1.8 million from the State of New Jersey, $750,000 from the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station at Rutgers University, $500,000 from the Cumberland Empowerment Zone, and $350,000 from the City of Bridgeton.

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