Food Center lauded

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BRIDGETON -- A groundbreaking ceremony marking the long-awaited start of construction on the Rutgers Food Innovation Center (FIC) incubator facility was held in the Florida Avenue Industrial Park Wednesday afternoon.

Construction of the FIC incubator facility will begin next week.

Project officials anticipate the facility, which is to be built on a 6-acre lot in the industrial park located along Route 49, will be ready to open for business on June 25, 2008.

It is anticipated the $7.65 million, 23,000-square-foot facility will provide unprecedented opportunities for the area’s farmers, agricultural cooperatives, food-business entrepreneurs, and existing small and mid-sized food companies.

The facility will offer those businesses access to state-of-the-art processing equipment, technical and business support, and educational opportunities.

Assemblyman Doug Fisher was invited to Wednesday's ceremony. FIC officials hailed Fisher as a champion of the project.

"I think this facility really is an enormous undertaking that is going to bring great results to Bridgeton, South Jersey and the entire agricultural sector in the state," Fisher (D-3) said.

What may seem to most area residents like nothing more than a small ceremony in which a few shovels of dirt were shifted meant so much more to the FIC team -- it was the celebratory culmination of nearly 10 years of relentless work for them.

It also means a lot to Fisher, who feels the incubator facility will create new jobs by attracting businesses to the area and help preserve Cumberland and Salem counties' reputation as the Garden State's agricultural center.

"I think it's hard for the local people to understand just how big this is going to be at this juncture," Fisher said. "It's going to translate into jobs, which, for me, that's the goal."

It was an especially gratifying ceremony for those who have been working toward the facility's construction since former Rutgers University-Cook College dean and New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station (NJAES) director Dr. Adesoji Adelaja, now at Michigan State University, came up with the idea for it in 1998.

"This is such an exciting day," Margaret Brennan, NJAES associate director, said. "I can't believe it."

It took "a lot of perseverance" to make it to this point, Brennan said.

While the facility itself will cost $7.65 million, the FIC has received more than $12 million in grants since it opened its office on East Commerce Street in 2001.

In addition to the construction capital, state and federal funding aided FIC officials' planning for the facility, as well as supporting the various programs the FIC has offered to its clients over the years.

The FIC, an economic development outreach center of Rutgers University and a part of the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station, has served more than 700 clients to date.

"If the program didn't work, we probably couldn't build the facility," Brennan said. "But the program did work ... and the funding has been made available to us."

The FIC was named the National Business Incubation Association's Incubator of the Year during the
association's annual conference in Seattle, Wash., this April.

FIC Director Lou Cooperhouse was excited when talking about the growth prospects for the FIC, once the long-awaited incubator facility is up and running.

"It's just such a major milestone for us now that we're actually entering the phase of construction after more than five years of planning," he said, noting the 700-plus clients the FIC was able to serve over that time period. "All of those successes have allowed us to get where we are today."

The FIC incubator facility's construction funding came from the following sources: U.S. Economic Development Administration, $2 million; Casino Reinvestment Development Authority, $2 million; the State of New Jersey, $1.8 million; NJAES, $750,000; Cumberland Empowerment Zone, $750,000; and the City of Bridgeton, $350,000.

FIC officials and Rutgers University senior project manager Joan Sitler met with Kevin Moran, the project manager for the incubator facility's contractor, Vineland's Stanker & Galetto, and the facility's architect, Vineland's John Pederson, at the FIC's East Commerce Street office Wednesday morning to go over construction plans.

Sitler described Brennan and Cooperhouse's passion for the project as "infectious."

After a quick lunch, the group headed over to the still-vacant industrial park to turn over a little dirt, their infectious passion in tow.

They were just getting a jump on next week, when Stanker & Galetto moves in, and their dreams are finally realized.

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