Budget Has City on FIRE

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BRIDGETON -- City and Rutgers University officials were certainly among those thrilled to learn Gov. James E. McGreevey signed off on the state's fiscal year 2005 budget Wednesday.

The $28 billion budget includes a $1.8 million grant to the state university for the construction of its proposed 25,000-square-foot food incubator facility here in the city.

"It's a clear commitment from the state that a center like the food incubator certainly can be a catalyst for growth and can spur the economy of Southern New Jersey," Lou Cooperhouse, director of the Rutgers University Food Innovation Research & Extension Center (FIRE), said Thursday.

"We can really be a vehicle for creating jobs and sustainable, viable, prosperous businesses in South Jersey and throughout the state," Cooperhouse continued.

With $3.3 million already earmarked for the facility's construction, FIRE is still about $2 million short of its overall funding goal for its ideal $5.5 million proposed facility, according to Cooperhouse, who noted a smaller facility of no less than 18,000 square feet could be built with an additional $1 million in funding.

Assemblyman Doug Fisher (D-3, Bridgeton), who vigorously promoted the inclusion of the $1.8 million grant in the budget, said he is "very hopeful" FIRE will receive the additional $1 million-plus necessary to make even the downsized facility a reality.
"We're at the point where we're close to being able to put the shovel in the ground, and that's the important thing," Fisher said.

The food incubator facility, which would work with existing businesses and develop new value-added food production companies through a state/university/private industry partnership, would become the first of its kind, a "model for the rest of the country," according to Cooperhouse.

Value-added food production is important in sustaining agriculture here in New Jersey, according to Fisher, Cooperhouse and others associated with the project, as many area farmers, who in the past could turn a profit by sending their harvests to food processing companies, are struggling these days.

According to Fisher, value-added production would allow these same farmers to develop their own branded products from their own harvests, or find a happy medium -- still selling a portion to the corporate giants, while using the rest to produce their own products.

City officials envision the proposed facility serving as the anchor of the future Florida Avenue Industrial Park, drawing businesses that can develop and grow with the expertise and technology available at the FIRE facility before moving out on their own.

"The goal of FIRE is to graduate 10 to 20 businesses per year," said Mayor Michael Pirolli. "Clearly, some of those businesses will fail, some will locate elsewhere, but some will locate here in Bridgeton, some will locate in Cumberland County, and some will locate elsewhere in South Jersey."

Pirolli noted the facility, and the spillover effect it could have on the area's food-processing industry, would be a great benefit for generations to come.

"Our children here need an innovative and high-paying place to work," said Pirolli, who has supported the project since it was proposed several years ago by Dr. Adesoji Adelaja, former Rutgers University-Cook College dean and director of research for the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station.

"This facility means there are going to be businesses that can and will need personnel with business, marketing and food science skills."

Pirolli and Cooperhouse credited Fisher for fighting for the funding at the state level.

"He spearheaded the legislative movement to get the funding out of the state for this project," Pirolli said.

Fisher acknowledged Thursday that it was a difficult fight, but one that he and fellow Third District Democrats Sen. Stephen Sweeney and Assemblyman John Burzichelli felt was well worth it.

"It's going to bring a lot of jobs and opportunities for the farming community to work on value-added products, technology issues, and a lot of business start-ups," Fisher said. "This is another piece of the recasting of the economy in our area. As
manufacturing left, we've had to come up with new areas that will spur development here, and this is one of those."

The appeal of the proposed facility, according to Cooperhouse and FIRE officials, is it would allow local farmers and entrepreneurs to work on their ideas, at the same time guided by industry experts, without having to buy the expensive manufacturing and packaging equipment before ever getting started; they can simply rent space at the facility to use FIRE's equipment.

Clients will also be able to draw from the knowledge of marketing and business experts.

FIRE applied to the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority this spring for a $3 million loan.