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Big Dig in Bridgeton

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BRIDGETON -- Local, county and state officials ushered in what they hope will be an era of economic prosperity for the city Tuesday afternoon with a groundbreaking ceremony at the site of the Florida Avenue Industrial Park.

"This is a big step. This is a big day for the city," Mayor Michael Pirolli declared after the brief ceremony.

The new industrial park will become the first built in the city in more than 40 years, according to Louis Joyce IV, city planner and director of economic development.

The 30-plus-acre industrial park is located between Route 49 and Willow Street and Division Street and Florida Avenue.

The contractor hired by the city in April to do site preparation work for slightly more than $1 million has already cleared approximately 70 percent of the land for the future industrial park, Joyce said.

Joyce noted that Bridgeton-based Don Rogers Inc. must still clear nearly 10 acres of trees, perform final grading of the land, create a storm water basin, and install water and sewer lines for the park.

"It's exciting because when we're talking (to interested businesses), we don't have to say, 'We're going to do this or that,'" Joyce said. "Now, we can tell them, "We've done this, we've done that."

Officials are hopeful the industrial park will be anchored by the Rutgers University Food Innovation Research & Extension (FIRE) Center's food-processing incubator facility.

FIRE Director Lou Cooperhouse attended the ceremony, and noted Rutgers officials
are hopeful they'll be hosting a groundbreaking ceremony of their own next spring.

"We're excited and hopeful that we'll be the first occupant of the park," Cooperhouse said.

FIRE, which learned last week it will receive a $1.8 million grant as part of the state's fiscal year 2005 budget, is still $1 million to $2 million short of its overall goal for the project.

FIRE officials and state legislators, including the Third District Democratic team of Sen. Stephen Sweeney and Assemblymen John Burzichelli and Doug Fisher, believe the proposed incubator facility would result in the rebirth of a successful food-processing industry in Bridgeton.

"It will pay dividends for decades," said Burzichelli, who credited Fisher, as did FIRE and local officials last week, for working to have the $1.8 million grant included in the state budget.

"It's a way to incrementally build up a new future for Bridgeton in that many, many new start-up businesses are going to come here by way of the Rutgers Food Innovation facility," Fisher said.

FIRE officials anticipate that once the incubator facility is up and running, the program will annually "graduate" 10 to 20 new businesses.

Ten to 20 new businesses mean more jobs for the area, making the industrial park and the FIRE facility an easy sell to the Cumberland Empowerment Zone (EZ) and the New Jersey Urban Enterprise Zone (UEZ) Authority.

Sandy Forosisky, EZ director, noted the EZ has contributed $353,000 for the overall industrial park development and $500,000 to FIRE for its facility.

"No. 1, it's helping existing and start-up food-processing businesses, and we hope it's going to serve as a catalyst to attract other businesses to the park," Forosisky said of the FIRE incubator facility. "No. 2, it means jobs, jobs and jobs."

The Bridgeton Urban Enterprise Zone contributed $500,000 to help the city acquire the land for the industrial park and for site preparation costs, UEZ coordinator Chris Cummings said.

Pirolli credited county freeholders and planners, U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo, R-Vineland, and South Jersey Economic Development District Executive Director Gordon Dahl, who attended the groundbreaking, with assisting the city in its effort to obtain a $1 million grant from the New Jersey Economic Development Authority. The grant was used to pay for the ongoing industrial park site preparation, he said.

FIRE has received $750,000 in funding from the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station for the construction of the incubator facility and a $1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development program for preliminary work, among other funding sources.