Rutgers unveils food innovation center

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BRIDGETON -- The doors opened Friday for the first time on an $8 million facility meant to move New Jersey farmers closer to the top of the national food production chain.

The new headquarters, a processing and research facility for Rutgers University's Food Innovation Center, won't be cooking on all burners until November.

But the ingredients for success are in place seven years after the program opened in temporary quarters here, a city that once was the major food-processing site in Cumberland County.

The center, especially with its new facility, is intended to counter economic pressures that have been closing in on American farmers in general and New Jersey farmers, in particular, for decades.

Those pressures include urbanization, consolidation in the ranks of food purchasers like supermarket chains, intensified competition at home and from abroad, rising production costs and quick-breeding regulatory standards.

The facility features kitchens, laboratories, cooling and freezing areas facilities, storage areas and offices.

Growers can bring in a crop with an idea for processing it and have the concept put to the test, from cooking methods to packaging to taste testing.

Center Director H. Louis Cooperhouse noted agriculture, even with those challenges, is worth as much as $82 billion in annual production to New Jersey.

"The time for such a center couldn't come soon enough," Cooperhouse commented, saying it will allow clients to move from "concept to commercialization" of products in one spot.

About 300 people came to the two-hour grand opening.


"Everything we're doing is to shorten the market chain between the producer and consumer," Kuperus said, adding the center has made a "measurable difference."

He called LoBiondo and N.J. Assemblyman Douglas Fisher, D-3, a former county freeholder, “true champions” of the center.

"When the budget was extremely tough, he stood up and said, 'They need this, and it's the only thing I'm going to advocate for,'" Kuperus said of Fisher.

Lawrence Township's Sheppard Farms, a family operation dating to 1682, is one of the local clients. The farm used the center to perfect an idea for microwavable asparagus.
"We need to get more dollars out of every box we produce," co-owner Thomas Sheppard said. Asparagus is a high-value product if it can be marketed.

"Now just because we have good farms and good product doesn't mean we can sell it," Sheppard said, adding, "I know nothing about packaging."

Both the turnout and the guest list reflected the number of government agencies with money and reputations invested in the grant-funded project.

The center has worked with 1,000 clients since opening in 2001 in quarters a mile away. The client list touches all 21 New Jersey counties, as well as interests from outside the state and even the country.

In 2007, the National Business Incubator Association gave the program its Partnership Award as a model for economic development.

Builder Peter Galetto said the facility essentially is a scaled-down version of portions of regular processing factories.

Different functions had to be in close proximity, yet separate, and that made it a challenge, he said.

George Sansiveri, a consultant to Rutgers, designed the building.

"It's all things to all people, so it has to be able to adapt," Sansiveri said.