

## Officials celebrate at food center site

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HILLSBOROUGH -- U.S. Rep. David Price, D-N.C., and other officials representing Orange County and three of its neighbors gathered Thursday for a "celebration of partnership" at the future site of the Piedmont Food and Agriculture Processing Center in Hillsborough.

The 10,400-square-foot building, scheduled to open in June 2010, will be a shared-use facility designed to allow farmers and local food entrepreneurs in the Piedmont to better compete in a "Buy Local, Eat Seasonal, Farm to Fork" economy. Located on Valley Forge Road, the center is about a 1½-hour drive from an estimated 15,865 farms in the 22-county area organizers hope the center will serve.

With the participation of businesses like Weaver Street Market and Whole Foods, organizers are touting the project as "an example of public-private collaboration in the Piedmont." Orange, Chatham, Durham and Alamance counties are all involved in the effort.

Orange County Commissioner Barry Jacobs said organizers began to envision the center as tobacco became "less of a sure way to earn a living" in recent years. The center's service area represents 35 percent of tobacco farms and 40 percent of tobacco production statewide, according to 2002 data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Noah Ranells, Orange County agricultural economic development coordinator, explained that Hillsborough's central location and proximity to Interstates 40 and 85 -- not to mention the fact that Orange County already owned the building -- made it a perfect site for the center.

In addition to the wide range of food-processing equipment that will be available to food growers in a commercial kitchen, the center will provide information about business development, health and food safety. Organizers anticipate that the center will eventually be financially sustainable, thanks to user and program fees and through the fundraising efforts of a nonprofit entity that will be formed to manage the center.

"This new processing center provides the crucial missing link in our local food chain," Chatham County Commissioner Tom Vanderbeck said. "Now our small farmers will have a place to process, package and distribute food to consumers close to where it was produced on the farm. That lowers transportation costs and our carbon footprint, while keeping the dollars in our local economy and supporting sustainable agriculture. It's a win for everyone."

During the last six months, the center has been awarded more than \$1 million total in grants from the N.C. Tobacco Trust Fund, the Golden LEAF Foundation and the N.C. Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund. Federal support has also come in the form of a member-sponsored project supported by Price.

"Economic development initiatives are hardly more appropriately applied than they are to this project," Price said Thursday.



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