

Editorial: Farms, families reap the benefits from food processing center expansion

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For 16 years, the role and importance of the nonprofit Western Mass. Food Processing Center on Wells Street in Greenfield has mushroomed.

With its new 2,800-square-foot cold-storage project, which is nearly ready, the Franklin County Community Development Corp.'s facility is helping more and more area farmers reach more and more customers by converting their fruits and vegetables into value-added products like sauces and salsas or by packaging it for use by schools and other large institutions long after the growing season ends.

That means farmers in Hampshire and Franklin counties have been able to expand beyond the traditional harvest season sale of fresh food at farm stands, farmers markets or supermarkets.

This month, the nonprofit CDC learned it can expand its catalytic role yet again with a three-year, \$446,210 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Franklin County proposal was among only 14 percent of those submitted from around the country that were funded under the USDA's Local Food Promotion Program, which pays for "innovative projects designed to strengthen market opportunities for local and regional food producers and businesses."

It shows again how sophisticated and successful the CDC's food processing program has become over the years — even on a national stage.

The money will allow the center to ramp up production and marketing of local produce to schools and other institutions around the region — the key to success of the commercial kitchen.

The grant, to be shared with Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture and the Massachusetts Farm to School Project, will help the commercial kitchen improve operational efficiencies. New equipment the money will buy will lower costs so the CDC can cut prices to schools and in doing so, expand its sales reach, according to Executive Director John Waite.

The largest upgrade will be a vibrating filler with a bag sealer and a washer-chiller dryer, all connected by conveyer belt, allowing blanched carrots, for example, to be moved into the chiller bath, shaken dry and dropped into the kitchen's individual quick-freezing equipment. It will double the center's capacity to 4,000 pounds of produce in an eight-hour workday.

Once all that food is packed and stored, the grant will provide \$60,000 for CISA in Deerfield to help more farmers to market their harvest as frozen and canned foods for institutions.

Another \$60,000 will go to Easthampton's 13-year-old Farm to School Program to market the local produce processed at the kitchen.

Waite and others at the CDC, CISA and Farm to School should be lauded for the smart work they are doing that has achieved a measure of national recognition. Each improvement at the commercial kitchen over the years has enabled expansion of the farms that not only fuel the economic engine in rural western Mass. but also preserve the rural look and feel of our landscape, our home. So the benefits accrue to all of us, whether we grow or eat the food ourselves.
