

News > Local (/News/Local/)

\$446,210 grant expands farm to school connection

By RICHIE DAVIS
Recorder Staff

Friday, October 06, 2017

As it works to complete its 2,800-square-foot cold storage project within the next four weeks, the Franklin County Community Development Corp. on Friday won a three-year, \$446,210 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The money is intended to help the Community Development Corp.'s Western Massachusetts Food Processing Center ramp up production and marketing of local produce to schools and other institutions around the region.

The collaborative grant, with Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture and the Massachusetts Farm to School Project, will help the 16-year-old commercial kitchen improve efficiencies, expand opportunities for farmers and increase local product sales to institutions and retail markets.

"This is a huge step toward greater efficiency, which means we'll be able to lower our costs so we can cut our prices to schools," said Community Development Corp. Executive Director John Waite.

The Community Development Corp. plans to buy \$150,000 worth of kitchen equipment over the next two months, Waite said. The largest piece is 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.

"That saves so much more time," said Waite, adding that the new apparatus will enable the food processing center to handle 500 pounds of produce an hour. That 4,000 pounds in an eight-hour workday is nearly double the 1,500 to 2,000-pound capacity now.

On Friday, the Wells Street food processing center — where lights and a sprinkler are scheduled to be installed for the cooler next week — processed a ton of peppers from two farms in Amherst and Hadley.

Fourteen percent of submitted proposals from around the country 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," according to Waite.

The three-year grant will provide \$60,000 for CISA in Deerfield to help more farmers use the food processing center as a way of extending the season for their produce to be marketed as frozen and canned foods for institutions – a key initiative of the Greenfield commercial kitchen.

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

Apart from helping farmers sell more produce, the grant should help increase consumption of locally grown food by students and consumers at institutions and retail levels throughout the year.

"What's cool is that we've been doing this for the past four or five years on a small scale that involves a lot of labor," Waite said. "Each piece of equipment is part of the whole equation."
