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OPENING THE GATES TO **BIO-AG**

BIO-AG BUSINESS INCUBATORS
WORKING TO PUT WISCONSIN ON
ITS WAY TO AN AGRICULTURAL
ECONOMIC RENAISSANCE

BY RONNIE GARRETT

ON TOP OF BIOAG GATEWAY DIRECTOR MICHAEL GAY'S DESK SITS A PEN MADE OF CORN.

This functional tool represents one of the many reasons why Madison's planned BioAg Gateway project is both necessary and needed in the state. Products made from crops represent the wave of the state's agricultural future, according to Gay.

"We typically think of crops as food and feed, but crops are used in many other ways," he explains. For example, cervical cancer vaccines and HIV medications are being derived from corn, lettuce is being used to create cancer drugs, and spider silk, grown in tobacco crops, is being used in bullet-resistant vests and seat belts.

The BioAg Gateway complex will help position the state as a world center for innovation, prototyping and commercialization of ag-based products. "We are interested in working with companies manufacturing products out of plants and crops," Gay says. "Our goal is to help establish financially viable companies that create jobs and a new tax base while establishing the state as a global leader."

BIOAG GATEWAY COMPLEX

The Wisconsin BioAg Gateway project will be an idea incubator focused on solving global commercial challenges through innovative agriculture and biotech solutions. When completed, it will consist of four integral components:

Midwest BioLink Center. A \$7.5-million, 31,000-square-foot facility serving as a business incubator to help bio and ag entrepreneurs take their technology and business ideas to the next level. This facility will offer users experimentation and prototyping flex space, a controlled environment facility, a plant science commercialization greenhouse, office and lab space, as well as business services and financial assistance.

BioAg Gateway. The BioAg Gateway Business Park, a 27-acre agribusiness complex, serves to help BioLink graduates turn their business models into thriving companies. Graduates can establish operations in the business park to remain close to campus resources.

Wisconsin Ag Discovery Center. This space will educate visitors on the agribusiness advancements taking place across the state and serve as a trailhead to state resources and innovators.

Wisconsin Ag Showcase. Part of 200 acres owned by the Wisconsin Department of Transportation may be made available for use as test plots to



Frank Staniszewski, Madison Development Corporation, and Michael Gay review floor plans for the BioLink site at Strang Inc.

Photo by Shanna Wolf

showcase working wetlands and field crop agricultural crops.

Madison Development Corporation (MDC) will build, own and manage the BioLink facility. MDC is a Dane County-based economic development non-profit with deep roots in financing technology-based companies. Day-to-day management of BioLink's internal technology will be performed under administrative contract with Orbital Technologies Corporation (Orbitec), due to its expertise in controlled environments and BSL II greenhouses.

Business incubator entrepreneurs can tap into Orbitec's expertise as well as the neighboring Wisconsin State Laboratory of Hygiene's research labs and technology. Participants can rent critical equipment, such as mass spectrometers, from the laboratory, rather than spend millions to acquire them.

"The state hygiene lab is the number one backup for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. As a result, they have every piece of technology and equipment that the CDC has, including five mass spectrometers," Gay says. "They have agreed to make this equipment available to bioag companies."

PAVING THE AG HIGHWAY

The idea behind the BioAg Gateway project, set to break ground in June 2011 with a target completion date of 2012, is to help budding ag entrepreneurs develop viable business models. Let's say someone hopes to develop a new crop related to a new type of feed, food, fuel, fiber, bioplastic, biopharmaceutical or the like. They can work on their business model in the incubator, then grow a test crop in the facility's greenhouses or controlled environments, and when ready transition to a field crop on the site's adjacent acreage.

"Eventually that product would be planted on farms throughout the state and region," says Gay. "Furthermore, when they graduate with a viable business model, they are going to go where the biomass is plentiful and cheap." For instance, if the company makes a product out of pulp, they might move to the northern part of the state where wood pulp is readily available. Or if the biomass tied to the new product is corn or soybean, they might graduate to south-central Wisconsin farmland. "This center serves to connect the rural community with the urban community, scientists with farmers, the northern part of the state to the southern part of the state, and so on," Gay adds.

Here is where the state truly stands to benefit: "Our state offers one of the more unique agricul-

tural centers in the country," Gay says. Madison in particular offers prominent national expertise in all four bioscience subsectors: Agriculture, Food Science, Biotechnology and Sustainability. "Here, we have skilled professionals in science, engineering, food processing, fuel manufacturing, bio-plastics and more."

AGRIBUSINESS INNOVATION SITE

The Central Wisconsin Agribusiness Innovation Center (CWAIC) plans to break ground on an agricultural business incubator near Owen in March. This \$9.8 million center represents a key component of a 71-acre agribusiness complex, the Clark County Agribusiness Technology Park.

Like the BioAg Gateway, this multi-purpose facility will house 48,586-square-foot of agricultural business incubator space, large- and small-group classrooms, public meeting and event space, a commercial test/classroom kitchen, laboratory space and a distance-learning lab.

"The facility is designed to foster education, training, research and business development in the fields of agribusiness, biotechnology, renewable energy and related industries," says Mike Kawleski, CWAIC executive director. "The center will ultimately strengthen the regional economy, create new jobs in agriculture and green technologies, and train people for those careers."

CWAIC received a \$4 million grant from the federal Economic Development Administration for the center, and will front the rest via funding from sources that include cash and in-kind donations from individuals, companies and foundations.

The Innovation Center already has an anchor tenant coming on board as Cherney Microbiological Services Ltd. expands its operations to the western and central parts of the state. Cherney Microbiological Services is a contract laboratory specializing in microbiological testing and technical support for companies manufacturing dairy, paper, meat, vegetable, cosmetic, personal care and industrial cleaning products.

Bringing in an established company such as Cherney is a boon to incubator clients and the center itself. The center requires a good mix of business startups and established companies, Kawleski explains. "We want to help small business ventures get started and help them grow. Hopefully they graduate from the center and build in our agribusiness park," he says. "But we also need anchor tenants for steady cash flow and financial consistency. Cherney

is a great fit because they do a lot of testing for agricultural products."

AGRICULTURAL RENAISSANCE

Initiatives such as these come not a moment too soon – the economic downturn has not been kind to Wisconsin's farmers. The state's total ag economy is approximately \$60 billion with \$26.5 billion coming from dairy farming alone, according to the Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board. Milk prices paid to state farmers have fallen in recent years, causing many farmers to tightly cinch their financial belts. "When dairy is hurting the state is hurting," says Kawleski. "When farmers have a dollar, they usually invest it back into their businesses. If farmers are not getting the money, everyone down the chain is affected."

As a troubled economy impacted the state, farmers have struggled, but the future of agribusiness remains bright. With initiatives such as the BioAg Gateway and the Central Wisconsin Agribusiness Innovation Center at the forefront, the state stands at the cusp of an agricultural economic renaissance. **CRW**

CWAIC NAMES NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The Central Wisconsin Agribusiness Innovation Center (CWAIC) recently hired Rebecca Baumann as its new executive director. Baumann, who will lead fundraising, tenant recruitment and marketing for the center, replaces Mike Kawleski, who will continue to serve CWAIC on its board of directors and lead its communications activities.

"Rebecca has diverse leadership expertise, as well as great experience as an entrepreneur, fundraiser, and partnership builder," says CWAIC president Ryan Stockwell of Medford. "We're pleased she has agreed to lead our project."

Baumann was most recently the executive director of The Minnesota Project, a non-profit organization that performs research and develops policy related to agriculture, renewable energy and food issues. She also served six years as executive director of the Wisconsin Land & Water Conservation Association, where she represented 72 county conservation departments and worked with legislators; the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade & Consumer Protection; and other local, county and state governmental entities.