

New ag center wants to help growth

Education, advocacy will be dual focus

Matthew Daneman
Staff writer

(January 16, 2007) — The area's agriculture industry has seen a good harvest of potential business prospects lately.

From ethanol plants sprouting across western New York to the \$96 million pasta-making and distribution plant to be built in Avon, "there are going to be a lot of demands on the farming community," said Robert King, director of Monroe Community College's new Agriculture and Life Sciences Institute. "Those folks are going to need help."

Now the controversial institute is trying to figure out what kind of help it will give. It only began operation this month, with King starting work. Currently he is its staff of one.

However, King said, the institute will end up providing services to farmers and others in the agriculture community "over and above what they've been accustomed to."

The institute currently takes up a cubicle in MCC's Homeland Security Management Institute offices at the Public Safety Training Facility on Scottsville Road. Plans are to move the center to the Brighton campus in 2008, after an addition frees up space there, King said.

As King envisions it, the institute will do everything from host seminars and provide Web-based instruction to offer work force training for the agriculture industry. It might eventually offer degree or certificate programs, depending on demand and as long as the programs don't conflict with those at other area colleges, King said.

But its goals will extend well beyond education to promotion of and advocacy for the region's agriculture industry, King said. He estimates as much as half of his time will be spent doing one-on-one consulting with farmers, landowners and municipalities about issues such as land-use rules and site plan reviews.

"I just don't want people to get locked into all we do is classroom instruction," King said.

The institute was formed late last year when Monroe County legislators, at the end of a six-hour budget meeting, cut \$175,000 from support of the Cornell Cooperative Extension in Monroe County, giving the money to MCC to establish the center. The extension office had no advance notice about the cut — nearly half of the \$400,000 it receives annually from the county — or about the center.

A chief complaint farmers have had about the extension office is it spends too much time on such efforts as master gardener and schoolchildren outreach, said Monroe County Farm Bureau President Kim Zuber.

"It's good work, don't get me wrong," said Zuber, of Churchville, a co-owner of Zuber Farms, which has 3,500 acres in Monroe and Genesee counties. "Back when the extension was originally formed, it was to give local farmers and agriculture access to the latest best practices and latest information Cornell could offer. I think the farmers feel extension has kind of drifted away from that."

However, said extension office Executive Director Margaret O'Neill, "Our mission has never been to serve agriculture. There are maybe some people who wish that was our mission. Our mission is to bring land grant research to address the needs in the local community. Obviously agriculture has been and will continue to be one of our core constituencies."

Because of the county funding cut, the county extension office has cut 20 percent of its staff — five people, O'Neill said. "Obviously that will mean reductions in some programs," she said. "We're still evaluating where those impacts will be."

What will not be cut, she said, are the teams that support commercial agriculture. That should not conflict with the new MCC institute, which apparently will focus more on farmland protection and agricultural districts, O'Neill said. "I think the institute first needs to determine what they see as their role," she said.

Farmers hope the MCC institute will provide a link to community college information and expertise nationwide, and will serve as an educational center that could get students interested in pursuing agriculture academically, Zuber said.

Some higher education institutions in the area already offer instruction in agriculture-related fields, from State University College of Technology at Alfred's various associate's degrees in agriculture fields to Finger Lakes Community College's horticulture program.

But New York's community colleges have not done the depth of training MCC plans to offer, King said. "The service we're providing tends to be unique."

The MCC institute is setting up a pair of advisory committees that will help determine its direction and offerings, he said.

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Some farmers sour over price of milk

Owners of family farms say increase isn't enough for them

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(January 12, 2007) — The Wagner family is part of a dwindling breed.

Gene and Sue Wagner have a dairy farm with 40 cows in Perinton, a farm that has been in the family for 300 years, long before there was a county of Monroe or a town of Perinton.

But while 40 cows might have constituted a nice-sized farm three centuries ago, today the Wagner operation is considered very small. The average dairy farm in the state has more than 600 cows.

And farmers like the Wagners are having a tough time making a go of it, with the price they get for their milk consistently falling short of what's needed to be profitable.

Yet they won't be defeated. Twice a day, seven days a week, they work through their daily ritual of milking the cows and selling the product to a dairy marketing group. Though the farm hasn't made a profit for most of the past five years, the couple and their children persist.

"It's to preserve a way of life," Sue Wagner said.

The Wagners and dairy farmers across the state have gotten some relief the past two months as milk prices climbed after hitting rock bottom last spring and early summer. Wholesale prices in December averaged \$13.52 per hundred pounds, up from a low of \$11.56 in May.

Consumers will probably feel the effect soon. The state Department of Agriculture and Markets recently raised the threshold retail price of milk, which allows upstate retailers to charge up to \$2.92 for a gallon and downstate retailers to charge as much as \$3.14. A state law against milk price gouging requires the state ag department to set the price — approximately 200 percent of wholesale.

But the recent price increases aren't enough to offset increasing costs, say area farmers and agriculture experts. Higher fuel and feed costs have cut deeply into the bottom line, with family farms struggling to make ends meet.

"They're accruing debt to keep the farm," said Bob King, agricultural specialist at Monroe Community College.

For most farms to break even, they need to receive \$14 to \$15 per hundred pounds on the wholesale level, said Tim Virgil, a member services coordinator for Dairy Marketing Services, which helps farmers assemble and market their products. Prices of \$15 to \$16 per hundred pounds would produce a reasonable profit, he said.

"No farm has been immune to the higher costs in 2006," Virgil said.

Benefiting the economy

Money made on the farm goes back into the community through the purchase of goods, from farm machinery to lumber, and services, such as accounting, and labor. "The money stays here," Virgil said.

But fewer farmers can afford to be a part of a dairy business that is the No. 1 agricultural industry in New York. The number of dairy farms fell by 18 percent in the first half of this decade.

The ones that survive are bigger and more efficient, with average gross income rising 50 percent between 2000 and 2005, to \$305,855 per farm.

Dairy farms large and small dot the Rochester region's landscape. Drive through any surrounding county and grazing cows can be seen along most any country road. But the bucolic setting sometimes hides harsh economic reality.

"If we don't turn things around, the only way we'll make it is by turning to vegetable farming," Gene Wagner said.

The past few years have been difficult for the Wagners. Not only has the dairy operation not been profitable, but there also are challenges when it comes to labor. They can't take days off because they don't have hired help, and it is difficult to find veterinarians who specialize in bovines.

To stay on the family farm, the Wagners sold the development rights on 90 acres to Perinton for open space preservation at \$8,000 an acre, or \$720,000. But that is a short-term solution. The Wagners still need to make a profit for the farm to be viable.

They might be more fortunate than other dairy farmers in the region because Perinton at least has an open space program that seeks to balance agriculture and development. Farmers in rural areas generally don't have the option to generate income by selling development rights.

Parts of Ontario, Wayne and Livingston counties—mostly towns on the fringe of urban development—have expressed interest in starting development rights programs, King said.

"There's always going to be a demand for dairy products," he said. "The question is if (farmers) can do it profitably."

Offsetting the losses

Higher wholesale prices are necessary, said Robert Colby, co-owner of Colby Homestead Farm in Ogden, which has 200 cows.

He grows cabbage, potatoes and peas to offset losses from the dairy operation.

Colby has been able to pay his workers and keep up with the bills, but not much else.

"We've been able to survive. But any improvements, we've had to rein those in."

Colby said a reasonable profit would be possible if he got \$14.50 per hundred pounds for his milk. But area farmers haven't seen that price level in two years.

Consumers in the Rochester area, meanwhile, have always paid low prices for milk, Colby said.

It's often used as a loss leader to attract shoppers.

"Milk is something consumers always check the prices on," he said. "Everyone can tell you what they paid for a gallon of milk."

In the Rochester area, retail milk prices averaged \$2.13 a gallon in November, compared with \$2.72 for all of upstate, according to Monroe Community College.

In 2000, the average price for milk in Rochester was \$2.51 a gallon, compared with \$2.40 for all of upstate.

"It's as cheap as a gallon of water," Colby said.

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