

## Legislators Seek "Credibility and Integrity" in Ag & Food Tech Park Project in Geneva

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by Linda McCandless

GENEVA, NY: Four legislators on a fact-finding mission came to the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva, NY, on Wednesday, October 4, to find out more about the proposed Agriculture and Food Technology Park. They toured the Station, heard faculty talk about their programs, were shown food processing facilities, and met with Station faculty and graduate students, scientists from local biotech firms, and faculty from Hobart William Smith and Finger Lakes Community College.

"We have to ask the tough questions from the beginning so new ventures like this don't flounder," said Assemblyman Edward Sullivan (D-69th District/Manhattan). "At some point, we have to decide what's in the best interests of the people of New York."

Sullivan was joined by William Magee (D-111th District/Oneida), who is chairman of the Assembly Agriculture Committee, Assemblymen Martin Luster (D-125th District/Ithaca), and Brian Kolb (R-129th District/Canandaigua). They were accompanied by Paula O'Brien, director of the Assembly Agriculture Committee, Wally Jahn, staffer for the Assembly Program and Counsel office, Hank Dullea, vice president for university relations, and Cornell's legislative associate



Suggested caption: Cornell University food microbiologist Randy Worobo explains his work in food safety and fluorescing pathogens to (foreground, l-r) Assemblymen Ed Sullivan, Brian Kolb, Bill Magee, and Marty Luster during the legislators' tour of the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station on October 4. CREDIT: J. Ogrodnick/NYSAES/Cornella, NY. CREDIT:

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Sidd Pattanayak.

As Chairman of the Assembly's Higher Education Committee, Sullivan let the Assembly session end in June without taking the critical vote needed on legislation to authorize the land lease for the proposed Agriculture and Food Technology Park on State University of New York (SUNY) land. SUNY owns the 78 acres of Experiment Station land in Geneva targeted for the Park. The legislation for the land lease will be re-introduced in 2001.

"State legislation must be approved to convey land with a long-term lease from the state to a non-profit entity to develop and manage the Park," said Director Jim Hunter. "It is the next big hurdle for this project."

Hunter and others in Geneva believe the Park is needed to help ensure the long-term viability of the Geneva Station as a world leader in research related to agriculture, food science, and biotechnology. The Park will also enable the Station to continue to attract and retain outstanding scientists and provide a stimulating and creative research environment.



Suggested caption: Olga Padilla-Zakour (right), director of the Northeast Center for Food Entrepreneurship, explains to Assemblyman Marty Luster (center) and Cornell legislative liaison Sidd Pattanayak (left) the program in food venture entrepreneurship at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva, NY, received 400 calls resulting in over 200 new products in 1999. CREDIT: J. Ogradnick/NYSAES /Cornell

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Magee, who sponsored the bill originally, said he didn't think the bill had gotten the kind of consideration it deserved in the last session.

"In my two years as chairman of the Assembly Agriculture Committee, I've discovered we can't do anything about the price we pay the farmers. What we have to do is come up with ideas to make their products more valuable. Working with scientists at Geneva, companies at the Ag and Food Tech Park will do that."

In addition to Magee and other local area Assemblymen, the Park has the support of Senator Michael Nozzolio (R-53rd District), whose efforts led to passage of the bill in the Senate authorizing use of the SUNY land for the Park. Congressional Representative Thomas Reynolds (R-27th District) also supports the project; he requested \$2.75 million in the 2001 federal budget for its funding.

Assemblyman Luster, a member of both the Higher Education and Agriculture committees, supported the bill in the last session, but withdrew his support after constituents raised concerns about research on genetically modified organisms (GMOs) at the Station. On Tuesday, October 3, Luster had participated in the second of four hearings in the state designed to help lawmakers decide whether or not to pass legislation to label or temporarily

ban genetically modified foods. Over 100 farmers, university professors and consumers attended the five-hour session in Ithaca.

"Field research using genetically modified organisms would not be conducted on the Park site," said Associate Director Bob Seem. "The site is for laboratory and office space and small-scale production facilities to test-market new products. We do not expect companies doing research in the Park to emphasize production of GMOs. In fact, the initial market feasibility study indicated the greatest interest by food processing companies."

## **THE GENEVA STATION ON TOUR**

Wednesday's tour focused on Station programs in food safety, wine making, food processing, entrepreneurial food ventures, biological control, precision breeding, and insect control. After visiting the Park site, the Assemblymen held a roundtable discussion with graduate students, post doctoral associates and scientists from local biotechnology companies. One of Sullivan's major concerns was whether private companies in the Park would compromise the "credibility and integrity" of research at the Station which receives 54 percent of its budget from SUNY.

"Research at public institutions like Cornell is noted for its impartiality," said Chris Hayes, director of marketing at BioWorks and a former Station horticulturist. "Professional integrity must be maintained or you're not employable in the long run. Scientists know that."

A roundtable discussion was also held with faculty and department chairs to address their interests in the Park. They spoke about the need for collaborative partners.

"Synergies that happen among public and private sector researchers are critical to the generation of new ideas," said geneticist Doug Knipple. "As it is now, scientists leave New York to go to work in the private sector in three other biotech clusters in the country-Boston, New Jersey, and Southern California. We need to enhance the critical mass right here."

Local educational partners at Hobart William Smith Colleges and Finger Lakes Community College (FLCC) addressed the benefits of the Park to local colleges and student populations as a potential employer and intern site. David Prull said FLCC had received funding to develop a two-year biotech degree program and he looked forward to companies in the Park providing employment for their students so they could remain in the area.

Companies in the Park will carry out research in agriculture, food and biotechnology that complements the research and extension programs of Cornell's 800-acre Experiment Station. The proposed 78-acre research Park adjacent to the Station, on the Denton Farm, will provide incubator space for entrepreneurs, multi-tenant buildings for small companies, and land for well-established companies to build their own research buildings. In addition to the basic infrastructure, the proposed facilities for the Park include a \$2.5 million incubator research building, a \$1.13 million greenhouse, and a \$2.8 million multi-tenant building. Development is planned in three phases with build-out for the first two phases expected to take three years.

Before coming to Geneva, Sullivan said he had questions that had not been answered to his satisfaction. In his concluding remarks, he indicated he "didn't have any more questions," and that the first opportunity to reconsider the bill in the Assembly would be when the legislators came back into session in January.

"I ended the meeting feeling very optimistic that all four legislators had a better understanding of programs at the Station and the benefits of the Park," said Hunter, following the tour. "I am optimistic that the bill will receive favorable support in the upcoming session of the Legislature."

The Ag and Food Tech Park project is a partnership between Cornell, the City of Geneva and Geneva IDA, Ontario County IDA, Geneva Area Chamber of Commerce, Geneva Growth, Inc., Empire State Development Corporation, SUNY-State University Construction Fund, and representatives from the NYS Assembly and Senate.

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