Food Processing Innovation Center Committee Report
2018/2019 Progress
Report Period: Sept, 2018 – Feb. 2019

Progress between partners and with facilities

The North Carolina Food Innovation Lab (NC FIL) has been active the last 6 months with finalizing the design of the facility alongside CRB Engineering from Cary, NC. Sub-contracts were released to Gamewell Mechanical (Salisbury, NC), Adams Electric (Charlotte, NC), Environomics Inc. (Bethesda, MD), Nycom Construction (Morrisville, NC), Sunland Fire Protection (High Point, NC), and Acropolis Construction (Baltimore, MD).

Demolition in the existing structure began the second week of January, 2019 after all permits were issued by the City of Kannapolis and Cabarrus County. Construction since the third week of January has been very active, and as of the writing of this report the following activities have been completed or are nearing completion: all of the HVAC, framing, fire suppression, and most of the water lines, electrical, and exhaust hoods. Positive progress was noted on drilling floor drains, low voltage wire pulling, and locating of some light fixtures.

The project as of January 31, 2019 had logged 3,716 safe work hours with zero reportable incidences. The building uplift was budgeted to cost $7.2 million (includes a $600,000 contingency). As of February 20th, $3.92 million was committed on contracts. We are projecting the project will come in on budget.

Process designs and equipment selection for the laboratories and pilot plants commenced late in the summer of 2018, and Executive Director Bill Aimutis met with numerous suppliers and refined the equipment selection. Equipment ordering started in early January, 2019, and continues to be in process. The first equipment pieces for the Pilot Plant are arriving in mid-March. Several pieces of laboratory equipment were bought in online auctions to maximize the funds provided for these facilities.

Aimutis reviewed the Operational Plan after onboarding on July 23, 2018, and wrote several strategic frameworks to further clarify how the business will operate. A Communications Committee was started, and early designs of advertisements and brand identity, including logo design, were stared. A professional firm from Raleigh, NC (Krobe Interactive, LLC) was hired to develop a logo, website, and branding materials. These activities will extend into April, 2019. There has also been an initial discussion with NCSU Contracts and Grants personnel about developing streamlined processes for non-disclosure agreements, research contracts, and Technical Service Agreements with potential NC FIL customers.

Personnel

Job descriptions and searches for key technical and administrative staff for the NC FIL were conducted during this period. Good candidates were identified for a Senior Food Scientist/Product Developer position, and we hope to move forward with an offer by March 29, 2019. The Pilot Plant Manager has been more challenging to identify qualified candidates, and we are continuing our search. Simultaneously, the Department of Food Bioprocessing and Nutrition Science initiated a search for a Plant Food Engineer (Extension/Research) to be housed at the NCRC and directly support NC FIL and NC Food Manufacturing Initiative goals. This search identified a good candidate, but he turned us down after a period of negotiations. The search has been re-opened, and several very good people have applied for the position.

Other relevant activities and engagement

Significant engagement continued during this period with both NC based and national/international food industry, with the goals of outlining partnerships both for NC FIL and identifying key opportunities for the broader food manufacturing initiative that would serve to:

(1) Drive the use of NC agricultural products, equipment or food;
(2) Increase the number and economic value of food manufacturing companies in NC; and
(3) Increase employment and private capital investment in food manufacturing in NC.

In this period, NC FIL has connected with a total of five North Carolina based companies and 19 national/international companies. Many of these meetings were coordinated with the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, as well as the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina. Since inception we have met with a total of 14 North Carolina based companies and 32 national/international companies.

Over the last seven months, four presentations about NCFIL were given in public settings: NC Chamber Agribusiness, NC Agribusiness Council, Rowan-Cabarrus Community College Agripreneur Academy Certification Ceremony, and Dogwood IFT. We have also been in conversations to position a unique business opportunity with two venture capital companies focused on food start-up companies.