

## Former WPS leader heads up agribusiness center

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By Danielle Begalke | Regional Editor |

With a deadline of March 2011 set for breaking ground for the Central Wisconsin Agribusiness Innovation Center, new CWAIC Executive Director Mike Kawleski has his work cut out for him.

The center, which will be just south of Highway 29 east of Owen, has been in the works for five years.

Kawleski said the 48,586-square-foot center, which will be in a 71-acre agribusiness park, could become reality by the end of next year.

Kawleski, who served as Wisconsin Public Service agriculture market leader for the past six years, started his new position in late June.

As the center's first executive director, he's leading fundraising efforts for the \$9.8 million project.

Last fall organizers secured a \$4 million federal Economic Development Administration grant for design and construction of the building. Nearly \$200,000 also has been raised, Kawleski said.

One of his chief tasks is securing the remaining funding for the center, which will serve as an incubator for agricultural businesses, Kawleski said.

As president of the Wisconsin FFA Foundation, Kawleski is no stranger to fundraising.

"I've been involved with fundraising for that and for other foundations and organizations over the years, including the Alpha Gamma Rho fraternity," he said.

There are a variety of ways to support the project, Kawleski said.

"We're looking for gifts from individuals, organizations, foundations and companies," he said, "and since it's a new facility there are naming rights available."

Another of his duties is seeking agricultural entities that have missions similar to what the center's organizers hope to accomplish.

"This is going to create emerging businesses and jobs in agriculture," he said. "We're seeking partners that are like-minded in that approach."

The city of Owen is seeking bids for sewer and water, and the agribusiness park is expected to be connected to the city's sewer and water lines by late fall, Kawleski said.

"We've been doing a lot of work visiting with companies, institutions and organizations that might have an interest in either being a part of the center or the larger business park," Kawleski said.

The agribusiness park's first tenant, a digester company that will use food waste to create energy, is expected to break ground this fall. The company will produce electricity, hot water and heat for the center, Kawleski said.

That partnership is representative of how Kawleski envisions relationships between the center and agribusinesses in the park.

"We anticipate that the center will partner very nicely with the tenants of the business park," he said. "The center will have a lot of services that tie into the tenants' needs."

Conference rooms, a distance-learning room, computer lab and classrooms - including a classroom kitchen - will offer workspace for businesses within the park and area schools.

Likewise, the agribusinesses in the park could provide offshoot research opportunities for center researchers, Kawleski said.

He hopes the center's laboratories will serve area veterinarians and food processors, many of whom now send samples to Madison.

Central Wisconsin residents can come to the center with business ideas.

"If people have a great family recipe they want to get on the market, they can come use our kitchen space," Kawleski said. "Our goal is to create emerging opportunities in agriculture, whether that's in food processing, forestry, renewable energy - there are so many different areas we could create businesses in."

Talks also have begun for a potential demonstration dairy plant at the site, he said.

"Starting from scratch, we have the luxury of being able to build the center the way it makes the most sense for the people that are going to use it," Kawleski said.

The latest recommendation was from an implement dealer who asked if a combine could be driven into the center, he said.

"He wanted a place where his mechanics could have their winter training," he said. "Now that we know that we can make allowances for that kind of use."

Center organizers are hoping to achieve platinum Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification.

"There are a lot of possibilities with the LEED certification of the building and its renewable energy features," Kawleski said. "The building itself will be a destination for seeing those practices put to use."

Kawleski, who lives in the eastern Wisconsin town of Sobieski, makes a weekly two-hour commute to Owen. His experience has been worth the drive, he said.

"This is an opportunity to create something that's going to have a long-term impact for central Wisconsin," he said. "It's not just local development - this will impact agricultural development in central Wisconsin all the way to the Twin Cities corridor."

"This has a direct impact on the industry I love," he said, "and it's a chance to really build a legacy for that region of the state."

Danielle Begalke can be reached at 800-236-4004, ext. 3827 or [danielle.begalke@ecpc.com](mailto:danielle.begalke@ecpc.com).