

WisBusiness: Cashton banking on green industries

7/26/2006

By Gregg Hoffmann
WisBusiness.com

CASHTON – This small community in Monroe County always has been known for its surrounding farms and beautiful natural landscape.

It's now also gaining a reputation for having a "green" approach to business, and that's not just the green of money. It's the type of green that fits in perfectly with those farms and natural landscape while also making money.

Cashton is developing the Cashton Greens Business Park, an innovative project in which businesses will create and utilize renewable energy.

In 2005, Gov. Jim Doyle announced a \$40,000 Agricultural Development and Diversification Grant for the development, to test the market feasibility of bio-products that could be produced at the park.

The latest occupant in that park will be Organic Valley cooperative. On May 24, Organic Valley Family of Farms' employees and farmers joined Cashton community members, state and local officials and business leaders for a groundbreaking ceremony to celebrate the co-op's building of a new \$15 million distribution warehouse.

"The new Cashton facility is yet another testament to Organic Valley's ongoing commitment to creating thriving and sustainable communities through organic farming," said George Siemon, CEO for Organic Valley, on the day of the groundbreaking.

Located at the top of a gently rolling field on Highway 27, the new 80,000 sq. ft. facility will sit on 40 acres of property and offer easy access to the interstate freeway system.

A primary feature of the Cashton warehouse will be a state-of-the-art Automated Storage and Retrieval System (ASRS) by Westfalia Technologies, Inc. of York, Pennsylvania. This unique system places pallets in a cooler up to 80 feet in the air, and then retrieves the pallets as needed by customers.

"The ASRS allows this facility to have a smaller footprint than typical warehouses," said Organic Valley Chief Operating Officer Louise Hemstead. "We want to use as few land resources as possible. We also expect the system will enhance our inventory management and virtually eliminate product loss due to expiration dates."

The design of the Cashton facility has a number of environmentally friendly features that allow for less refrigeration and electricity usage. Fewer spare parts are used in the building, reducing future landfill waste, and cranes in the warehouse regenerate power as they operate.

"The Cashton facility is another example of Organic Valley's efforts to employ green business practices both on and off the farm," said Hemstead.

Organic Valley is not the only company using green business practices in Cashton. Since 1984, in fact, Cashton Farm Supply has done so. The company produces organic chicken feed.

"We love Cashton Farm Supply," said Faye Jones, executive director of Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service, recently told the La Crosse Tribune. "They were organic before organic was cool."

The business was certified organic in 1997, and has grown steadily since. CFS now sells 13,000 tons a year of organic poultry feed, shipping to farmers from Texas to Manitoba, Canada.

CFS sells dozens of different blends of chicken feed, all of which they custom blend in their mill. CFS also sells organic seeds and fertilizer in the spring for local farms.

The concept of the Cashton Greens Business Park started in the early 1990s. The Cashton Village Board and Cashton Development Corporation, spearheaded by local banker Scot Wall, joined forces in 1991.

Together with the village board, the development corporation purchased 121 acres of farmland near the Vernon/Monroe County line in preparation for developing an industrial park with an environmentally friendly concept.

The vision of the boards was to differentiate Cashton from other communities attempting to attract business. They seek business people who believe as they do that "America's resources are worth preserving and protecting for future generations."

Progress on the concept was slow for a decade, but now is taking off. Madison Environmental Group was hired by the Cashton Area Development Corporation to create a concept site plan for a new environmental business park in 2005.

The plan includes roads, access points, eco-business locations, storm water storage areas, a wind turbine and landscaping elements such as prairies, buffer strips, rain gardens, an organic orchard, bicycle paths, mowed trails, and a food waste recycling storage shed.

Cashton village president Robert Amundson said village officials are excited by the Organic Valley move and other possibilities.

"I guess Organic Valley is hoping to get some of the companies they do business with to locate there," Amundson said. "The Development Corporation also is working with investors on some other ideas."

Some of those other ideas could include a methane production plant, perhaps to utilize manure for energy, and a bio-diesel production facility. No official plans for these business possibilities have been made public at this time.

"We're excited about the Cashton Greens project," said Russ Dawber, project manager for Organic Valley, when the coop first announced its building plans. "Something like this is desperately needed to reduce the carbon dioxide overflow in the world.

"A green energy park using renewable energy sources, wind generators, possible hydro power and refineable products fits the Organic Valley mold and were proud to be part of such a movement."