Ground Breaking Research Park North

The merger two years ago of the Guelph Food Technology Centre with global food safety and quality player NSF International is evolving into a major new facility in Guelph.

Bracing themselves against biting winds Thursday, about 40 people gathered on a windswept hill in the University of Guelph's Research Park North property for a groundbreaking event for a 25,000-square-foot building. A number of city councillors and staffers were on hand, as well as other dignitaries.

"We see a lot of opportunity for growth in the Canadian marketplace," NSF International president and chief executive officer Kevan Lawlor said in an interview. "NSF/GFTC is a wonderful business for us."

Lawlor said the building will serve as the company's Ontario hub for food safety training, consulting and technical services.

Based in Ann Arbor, Michigan with over 1,200 employees worldwide, NSF serves clients in about 150 countries. It has a number of areas of expertise, including public health and safety-based risk management; food safety in all areas of the supply chain; a water division that certifies products that come in contact with drinking water; and consumer product testing and certification.

Lawlor said at the groundbreaking event that his company made a commitment to Guelph, the University of Guelph, and its employees that when it merged with the Guelph Food Technology Centre (GFTC) the company was "committed to invest in our future in this region, and today we've made a very important step in delivering on that commitment."

He called the location ideal. The Research Park North building has the capacity for about 85 staff members, double the current number of staff in Guelph, Lawlor said in the interview.

He said the skilled people needed to staff the facility can certainly be found locally, and jobs will be added over the next couple of years. There is also the opportunity to collaborate with the university's research and development capacities.

The development is a strategic one for the company, which has had a presence in Canada for about 70 years.

"We are in the midst of the Ontario Food Cluster, one of the largest food and beverage processing jurisdictions in North America," he added. "We see great opportunities to offer our expertise and services to the organizations that are members of that cluster."

The Ontario Food Cluster consists of more than 3,000 food and beverage companies in an industry that represents about $40 billion of annual economic activity. The sector is Ontario's largest employer.

The Lammer Group of Companies is constructing the building and will act as its landlord. The university owns the land. The Guelph office of Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health is on the same site, which is behind the Future Shop on Stone Road.

Tom Lammer of the Guelph-based Lammer Group said in an interview the NSF facility will be a two-storey, 25,000-square-foot building with a level of underground parking. Construction is underway.

The NSF International project "is more than just a building," Lammer told those gathered for the groundbreaking. "It's an extension of one of North America's thriving university-based agri-food/bio-tech clusters here at Research Park. And in a broader context it is a demonstration of how a medium-sized community can capitalize on its unique and authentic brand and attract world-class
investment."

The project will create jobs, enhance the tax base, and strengthen the University of Guelph's reputation as a food sector leader, Lammer added. "And it's private business gaining competitive advantage by harnessing local skill and setting."

Guelph Mayor Cam Guthrie said groundbreaking ceremonies are "a great symbol of economic growth and investment in our city." He thanked NSF/GFTC for its investment and commitment to Guelph, and for deciding to stay in Guelph and create jobs here.

"This particular groundbreaking is a true Guelph success story," the mayor added. "It shows the tremendous importance of the strong relationship between the U of G and the private sector."

He said the development demonstrates success in the growth of the food and agriculture innovation sector, one of the most important sectors for Guelph, identified in the city's economic development strategy as one of the city's greatest strengths and opportunities.

Peter Cartwright, general manager of economic development for the City of Guelph, said the NSF/GFTC development supports the city's efforts to attract more food-based companies and generate research and development opportunities.

"This is another piece of that puzzle, and it is an important piece," Cartwright said. "It also demonstrates recent investment, which is always good to show our prospects. So it's a good opportunity for the city."

He added that the fact NSF International is a major global company is an important selling point when trying to attract other companies and promote the city internationally.

Robin-Lee Norris, chair of the university's board of trustees, said there was an "absolute desire" on the part of all parties involved in the development to make it happen.

"The University of Guelph is very pleased to fill in a very key piece of our Research Park North," she said, adding that the building is the next step in NSF's commitment to local partnerships.

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