

Mucci Farms primary crop is hydroponic tomatoes, though it offers other vegetables, such as cucumbers.

PHOTOS BY MUCCI FARMS

seeds of GROWTH

Mucci Farms Bring Opportunity to Huron

BY MYRA ORENSTEIN

A cres of glass and steel structures housing high-tech hydroponic farming facilities now line what was once traditional farm land in the southwest corner of the Huron community. The site, the location of the new Mucci Farms development, is just over 95 acres. Mucci Farms specializes in ecologically friendly and sustainable hydroponic farming, primarily focusing on tomatoes, cucumbers and peppers. The City expects this to be a major economic shift for the region. The site was acquired by Mucci Farms in the summer of 2017 after almost two years of planning. The first of three anticipated greenhouses is nearly complete, with operations anticipated to begin the spring of 2018.

The partnership and decision to locate in Huron was an easy one for Mucci Farms. Easy access to major transportation routes, competitive advantage of access to Huron Public Power (the site will be a major consumer of electricity), Huron's water filtration operations and the proximity to Mucci's primary headquarters in Kingsville, Ontario were factors. These assets didn't go unnoticed by Mucci nor did the city's assistance with working through the administrative processes. "Huron's team has been a pleasure to work with," says Bert Mucci, CEO of Mucci Farms. "They've been extremely helpful in assisting us through the rules and regulations of

Ohio and, to take it a step further, they have a genuine excitement about our expansion and a passion for the Erie County community. We feel very welcomed."

Huron's location also contributed to the decision. "Huron's geographic location is just on the other side of Lake Erie, almost directly across from our home base. As a result, the two cities have consistent weather patterns and growing conditions so it's a seamless transition in terms of farming. We don't have to learn any new growing strategies," Mucci explains.

Mucci International Marketing is now a major produce purveyor in North America. Now in its 54th year of operation, Mucci is a family owned business founded after Tony and Gino Mucci's emigration from Italy to Ontario. The two initially leased 21 acres of farmland, eventually expanding the business to include their own packaging and marketing operations with the creation of Mucci Pac in 1994. The business grew further into Mucci International Marketing in 2000. Today, with the founders' children running the business, Mucci Farms covers a 400-acre footprint and distributes product to local grocery stores in addition to major chains throughout North America such as Walmart, Costco, Kroger and Sam's Club.

"The purpose of our expansion to the United States was primarily based on proximity to market. We currently export 65 percent of our product south of the Canadian border so having a facility in the U.S. was a natural step for us to take," explains Joe Spano, Mucci VP of sales and marketing.

Huron City Manager Andy White says, "Mucci's introduction into the community presents an exciting and monumental opportunity for the City. This redevelopment is a culmination of years of planning and policies that attract economic development while positively impacting the local community."

The development of the Mucci site will roll out in three phases. The first phase is a 24-acre greenhouse currently under construction (nearly completed by the time of this writing.) The remaining two phases will be completed dur-

Huron and nearby residents will have access to a wealth of healthful produce with the addition of Mucci Farms.



Mucci Farms owners Bert (left) and Gianni (right) Mucci run the Ontario-based family business.

"Mucci's introduction into the community presents an exciting and monumental opportunity for the City."

— HURON CITY MANAGER ANDY WHITE

ing the next one to two years. The site, once completed, is anticipated to be just over 50 acres under glass.

According to White, progress on all phases will be revealed to Huron residents on an ongoing basis. "Mucci Farms is a robust company with a substantial marketing effort that has been very active in introducing the project," he says. "We have been working together to coordinate media efforts in the short term and will continue to report on the progress and further expand upon the partnership as time goes on."

Part of the local initiative also involves notifying Huron residents of new job opportunities. The City anticipates more than 200 new jobs to be introduced to the community, ranging from greenhouse labor to sales, administrative and greenhouse grower positions. As the facility ap-

proaches operational status, Mucci will begin advertising for available positions.

The job growth combined with what White envisions as additional business development opportunities will undoubtedly translate to major economic impact for the city. Council has set a goal to continue to increase service delivery without increasing costs to its citizens. This has created a growth centric strategy for the administration. The "City is a firm believer in the concept that investment produces additional investment," says White. "This is one of a multitude of exciting developments the pipeline with specific focus on the Huron Corporate Park, Main Street Corridor and other initiatives highlighted with the Master Plan." The next few years are shaping up to be very exciting and transformative in the City's future.



Municipal Building
417 Main St.
Huron, Ohio 44839

BUILDING A HOME

Good-bye grain elevator: The Conagra site is slated for development

Amidst the attraction of Mucci Farms' \$70 million investment in a three-phase high tech greenhouse — serving the needs of Walmart, Sam's Club, Kroger and Trader Joes — the additional new private investment in brick and mortar to house hundreds of new jobs and significant investment in public infrastructure, the redevelopment of Huron's waterfront remains a top priority and opportunity. The city's policy has been constant during the past decade. Use efficiency to drive down city operating costs; reallocate savings to development and infrastructure projects aimed at attracting new investment; exercise innovative financing partnerships; and grow a tax base sufficient to enhance quality of life and community continuously.

The redevelopment of the former Conagra site is a great example of this effort and, recently, the city turned a significant corner toward this end, partnering with the Liberty Development Company on the first phase of a new development.

Since it was notified in 2005 of Conagra Foods' intent to close its Huron operation the city has been busy carefully managing its redevelopment. The city and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) purchased the 20-acre property for \$3.5 million and divided it in half, with funding derived 100 percent from a grant. The partnership continued as the city was awarded a \$3.1 million grant from ODNR to construct a public boat launch in 2009, which has generated hundreds of new trips to the city each year. In 2010, the city applied for and was awarded a \$2 million grant from the Clean Ohio Revitalization Fund. The 25



The City of Huron has partnered with Liberty Development Company for the first phase of redeveloping the former Conagra site as part of the plan to redevelop the waterfront.

percent local match of \$500,000 was covered by a portion of the 2009 boat launch project; \$792,000 of the new infrastructure was eligible in lieu of direct payment. That saved the city \$500,000 and essentially providing 100 percent of the funds necessary to remedy the industrial buildings north of the new boat launch.

Demolition of the 235,000-square-foot warehouse, concrete silos, support buildings and environmental clean-up commenced in January of 2012 and was accepted as a clean and buildable site by the state in 2015. Several hundred feet of riverfront had been made accessible to the public for the first time, but much of the site remains inacces-

sible. Since the property was purchased by the state and city, no property taxes have been collected and the city maintains the land and facilities as part of its annual budget.

In 2015, the city worked with an economic development consultant to market the community and property to establish a development partnership. As a result, the city signed an agreement with Liberty Development of Cleveland this fall. Liberty has vast experience constructing, developing and managing real estate projects throughout Northeast Ohio and fills a void the city needed to transition the former industrial property into an active, productive status for the community.

During the next six months, the city and Liberty will be conducting environmental and engineering analyses and completing marketing studies to determine the most appropriate layout for a one-acre public park, enhanced pedestrian access to the water and placement of roads and utilities. The cost of this work is being shared as part of the partnership and the reports will be owned by the city. To help pay for these public improvements the city established a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) District at the site. Under this distinction new property taxes created from development on the current site can be diverted to help pay for its improvements. A 20-unit residential project on two of the city's 10 acres is planned to begin in the summer of 2018. The homes are anticipated to sell in the \$300,000 range and generate more than \$100,000 per year in new real estate taxes, a portion of which would be used to pay for public infrastructure requirements without having to increase taxes in the community while activating the site. The construction of new housing and availability of necessary infrastructure are expected to generate new interest in the remaining six to seven acres, which could be sold to second- and third-phase interests. Huron waterfront lots are valuable and in short supply, and the city expects the value of these lots to increase as the first phase of redevelopment is completed. The sale of these lots would generate several million dollars in new resources for the city to continue its course of improving quality of life while maintaining its costs in an era where many communities are raising taxes or reducing services.

This year, plans will be finalized and a community stakeholder outreach will be conducted to provide an opportunity for public input and comment on the plans. Next year is shaping up to be a year of excitement and potential — stay tuned.

PLAY TIME

Fabens Park improvements make a difference

BY MYRA ORENSTEIN

Two major improvements are coming to Fabens Park this offseason. During the past 5 years, the Huron Joint Recreation District partnership between the City, Huron Township and Huron City Schools has produced millions of dollars worth of investment in quality-of-life assets at Fabens Park. Past projects include the 1.25-mile, multi-purpose path, reconstructed parking area, improved drainage system, fencing upgrade, field renovations, resurfaced tennis areas, new playground area and a major US 6 entrance upgrade. This year and 2018 will see two more assets: a new storage and outdoor pavilion area and a re-worked Adams Ave entrance.

"The park has always been an instrumental asset for community use and recreation," says City Manager Andy White. "Our master plan study showed there was a desire for more diversity in uses in our parks, especially at Fabens. Being such a large as-



PHOTO BY MIKE SPAFFORD

set, we've focused on projects that both enhance its main use (softball/baseball) and widen the audience (passive recreation, new playground equipment, tennis area, pavilion space). The partnership with the HJRD and Parks Department staff's dedication has made this site a very successful project."

The Michigan Left, which was installed in 2015, added east and west access from US 6 to the park. Prior to the installation, patrons of the park were limited to entering the park through either a residential area or from the west on US 6. At the time of the improvement, ODOT worked with the city to acquire additional funding to improve the Adams Ave entrance to the park. With the improvements

at US 6, the volatility and condition of the Adams Ave entrance became a serious concern. If the City was to promote additional traffic via US 6, then something had to be done to make the Adams Ave entrance more reliable.

Next year will see the installation of a new culvert, walkway and roadway connecting Adams Ave to Fabens Park. In 2015, the city was awarded grant funds to take a pedestrian path from the walk bridge to the Adams Ave entrance. This project will continue that walk from Adams Ave into the park, eventually connecting the multi-purpose trail in the park with the Lake Shore Electric Trail for more than 2 miles of protected pedestrian trails.

"This project will also make for quicker and safer access for emergency personnel," adds White. The project is anticipated to cost roughly \$275,000 and be completed in time for next spring's baseball and softball programs.

The second project is the installation of a new 3,800-square-foot pole barn. The structure, which is currently under construction, will be utilized for storage and covered open air shelter space. This site will free up much needed storage space at the main facility on Wall Street, making operations much more efficient by reducing a significant amount of travel time.

"A significant portion of our maintenance and program operations center around Fabens Park. Having the additional storage at Fabens Park will be very beneficial to our operations," says Doug Steinwart, Parks and Recreation operations manager. Additionally, the structure will add much needed pavilion space. "As our programs grow and community use of the park increases, our need for covered outdoor space increases. Unfortunately, we lost space earlier this year due to structural concerns. This will replace the lost space and add more, which is very beneficial to the patrons of the park," says Steinwart, adding, "It's very exciting to see how far the community has come in the redevelopment of the park after completing the Master Plan."

Once completed, the structure will have roughly 2,200 square feet of covered pavilion space for the public, replacing and expanding upon older pavilion space that was demolished earlier this year. There will also be roughly 1,600 square feet of storage space for the department. The project is estimated to cost roughly \$165,000 and be completed this winter. If you are interested in rental of this or any other space, contact the Huron Parks and Recreation Department at 419-433-8487.

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