

A conversation made concrete
PDCCC warehouse, distribution training facility opens
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FRANKLIN

Over two years ago, Paul D. Camp Community College President Dr. Dan Lufkin and The Tidewater News Publisher Tony Clark had a conversation that became more than just talk. Their words — their ideas — were put into action and made concrete. On Wednesday morning, all that became official with the dedication of the Paul D. Camp Community College Regional Warehouse and Distribution Training Facility.

The site is not a new building, though, but instead the newspaper's unused warehouse now repurposed. There are sessions available for forklift, reach truck and clamp truck operator sessions. Also, students can take Certified Logistics Associate and Certified Logistics Technician programs, as well as Warehouse and Distribution Foundations courses.

After thanking so many individuals and organizations for their part in making the project real, Lufkin said, "Clearly, this was a collaborative effort across many sectors, making this training facility project extra special and one that adds value to the economic ecosystem of our area. In this renovated space — designed and outfitted to replicate a real-world warehouse environment — we not only will be able to customize training to meet local employers' needs, but more importantly, we will be able to help put people to work in meaningful jobs that allow for career advancement and pay a family-sustaining wage. "Students and workers alike will learn hands-on about the skills required to succeed in the logistics business. Those who complete our affordable and accessible programs (that range from 3 days to 16 weeks) will have the required skills to improve work performance and be career-ready to fulfill the needs of the supply-chain industry."

He reminded the audience that having a trained workforce is probably the most important element for when a business looks where it can be established. The facility will be one that site location consultants can witness.

"They will see that we — and I mean the collective we — are serious about building a pipeline of qualified, committed and highly trained workers that will help our businesses grow and thrive in a competitive market," said Lufkin.

Clark later said, "I'm glad our company was in a position to contribute to this important project. Workforce development is a significant part of any community's economic health, and I expect this new training center will pay dividends for years to come."

John Reinhart, CEO and executive director of The Virginia Port Authority, praised the commonwealth as being "one of the best states to do business." Referencing an upcoming report by CNBC, Reinhart also stressed that workforce availability and development are so crucial to companies.

His company, he added, "came up with a team to make this center a reality."

Representing Gov. Ralph Northam was the Chief Workforce Advisor to the governor, Meagan Healey. "I can't wait to share this with the governor," she said, adding that such a facility will have the power "to make a difference in people's lives."

Andrew Murrell of Franklin, a graduate of the college's training at the previous location, told how his stepfather originally suggested the workforce center. He was especially thankful to the center's career coach Lisha Wolfe.

"She got me into the fork-lifting program [from which he earned his certificate] and helped me build a resume. She did more than her job required," said Murrell, who then got work at Franklin Lumber.

Later, he decided to find a place that paid more, and with his training and experience, was able to get new work at the World Market in Windsor.

"It was a win-win situation," said Murrell.

President and CEO of Hampton Roads Workforce Council Shawn Avery then presented a \$20,000 check that will be used for student scholarships. He added that this will be the first in an annual series of such contributions.

“It was a labor of love,” said Angela Lawhorne, director of the Regional Workforce Development Center next to the Franklin campus. She added that the scholarships will go a long way in helping students. She was especially grateful to Mike Renfrow of the Port Authority for leading a team that worked on the project.

With an award of appreciation in hand, Renfrow later said that the team — which included coworker Tommy Swankler and HR leader Jim Bibbs: “We did what it took,” he said, adding “You have the nicest people here [in Franklin.]”

Before the ribbon-cutting and tour, Lufkin urged everyone to take a close look at what's been done.

“You will see some magnificent learning tools being demoed by our students and staff in computerized classrooms, on true-to-life forklift simulators, and with a warehouse management system. In addition to competency-based learning modalities, students will learn about OSHA requirements, and will receive soft-skills training in such areas as problem solving, teamwork, and interpersonal communications that will allow them to excel immediately upon placement in the workforce. And, all of this was made possible by so many of you here in attendance.”

Looking around during the site tour and demonstrations, instructor Wayne White said, “This is heaven. I know I'm tickled.”

Hubs announces expansion into Franklin
Gourmet peanut company to invest \$1.6M in new site
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SEDLEY

Hubs, the gourmet peanut company based in Sedley, will expand operations into the building formerly used by Farm Fresh on Armory Drive. Lynne Rabil, president and CEO of Hubs, made the announcement during a ceremony on the company grounds in Sedley on Thursday afternoon. Later that day, Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam formally announced to the rest of the Commonwealth that Hubbard Peanut Company Inc. will invest \$1.6M to establish the new operation. Rabil later told *The Tidewater News* that money will be specifically only for necessary equipment. She added that the purchase of the building is completely separate.

From this growth will come 10 new jobs and an increase in the purchase of Virginia-grown peanuts by a third, as well as lead to more investments at the Sedley facility.

“Our administration is focused on creating jobs and stimulating economic development across the Commonwealth, particularly in our agriculture sector, Virginia’s largest private industry,” said Northam. “We are proud to support quality, family-owned businesses like Hubbard Peanut Company that are growing opportunity and helping to revitalize our rural communities. With this new venture and their commitment to using Virginia-grown peanuts, the company will ensure their success is shared with farmers and producers throughout the region.”

Virginia Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry Bettina Ring told all at the ceremony, “It’s so nice to be back again. ... This really is a great day for the Hubbard family and the Franklin Southampton business community and for us in the Commonwealth of Virginia as we celebrate new jobs, markets and investments.”

Ring outlined the importance of the agriculture and forestry industries, particularly to this state, noting they bring in about \$91B and 334,000-plus jobs.

“Virginia has been a longtime leader in the specialty food and beverage sectors, and Hubbard Peanut Company has been a pioneer in this industry,” she said. “Their commitment to customer service, product quality, local sourcing, and the highest levels of food safety makes them a company we are proud to support.”

As noted in both the ceremony and within the governor’s statement, both the City of Franklin and Franklin Southampton Economic Development Inc. worked with the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services to make the project happen in the Commonwealth. Northam OK’d a \$40,000 grant from the Governor’s Agriculture and Forestry Industries Development fund for the project, which Franklin will match with local funds. The company is also eligible to receive state benefits from the Virginia Enterprise Zone Program, administered by the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development. This is the first Governor’s economic development announcement in the City of Franklin since 2003.

Rabil also told the paper that the grant “recognizes new construction that adds to property taxes but in our case the city will receive the same property taxes as always before so the net increase in revenue is based on new equipment.”

When it was her turn to speak, she told everyone, “Welcome to our birthday party and thank you very much for this lovely gift you have brought to us today! We are proud of our Commonwealth and are very appreciative that this grant was created to benefit and encourage agriculture. We grew up with my grandfather’s peanut farms surrounding us and we have been spreading the word of great Virginia peanuts for the past 65 years. With this new opportunity, we hope to encourage our local farmers to plant even more. Of course, we always want everyone to eat more peanuts.”

The birthday to whom Rabil referred was that of her late mother, Dot Hubbard, who was born on Nov.

7. She and her husband, H.J., began the company 65 years ago.

Rabil also acknowledged Vernon Parker, who was the first full-time employee hired by the couple.

“Vernon worked with us from the very beginning until his retirement three years ago. He has seen our family business grow from the time our mother began skinning peanuts by hand in our home right here and until eventually with his help and the help of many in the community, she began outsourcing that step. Without a forklift — only their backs — Vernon helped our father on Saturdays move the peanuts that had been cooked and packaged during the week to the walk-in cooler in the McClenny Sedley Store down the street, and then back again for shipping closer to Christmas. ... Thank you, Vernon.” She recognized her brother and twin sisters, Hubbard, Harvey, Sandra Edwards, and Terry Powers. “As children and teenagers, we all worked after school and weekends during the season, setting up boxes, sweeping floors, making deliveries, and filling lots and lots of red, white, and blue Virginia Peanut Grower promotional bags by hand. Yes, we have been spreading the word of Virginia peanuts in many ways through the years.”

The Hubbards' three grandchildren were called on to stand: “They are also owners and are already very engaged in leading the path forward! It is with confidence that we are taking this step with an eye toward the 100th anniversary of Hubbard Peanut Company when this fourth generation (who is also here today) will be in position to take over.”

Naturally, the employees were lauded for their dedication: “We all know none of our growth would have been possible, nor can we succeed in the future, without this valuable group of employees who are with us today. ... Every single person has a very important role to fill. Among them, we have our core leadership team and individuals with much talent, dedication and a willingness to make sure that we maintain the highest standards in the industry.”

She also thanked Amanda Jarratt for her past work with FSEDI; the current team; the City and Southampton County; as well as VDACS.

The expansion is the first for Hubs since 1998, and had already run out of space within 10 years, said Rabil. The company went on to rent off-site from “our Birdsong friends,” all the while exploring possibilities.

At the Franklin site, she said, “We envision an enhanced retail marketplace that will serve customers and visitors passing through Southampton County on Highway 58. We are encouraged by the proximity of the limited access interchange along this quickly growing thoroughfare and we will capitalize on the availability of the many amenities that already exist at this gateway to downtown Franklin.

“I am happy that we will continue to grow in Sedley while expanding into the City.”

Investment, new jobs will bring life to shuttered facility
Bon Bon Farms slated to invest \$8.5 million, create 162 jobs
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BOYKINS

A vacated warehouse-sized building in Boykins has a new occupant who's already putting the space to use, and whose product will cultivate both money and employment in Southampton County. Franklin Southampton Economic Development Inc. announced on Friday that Bon Bon Farms LLC will invest \$8,551,000 and create 162 new jobs to establish its new company in town.

The site is the former Asheboro Elastics Corporation facility, better known locally as Narricot, which closed this past June.

James Lee, who is Bon Bon's owner, said in a phone interview that in its first to second year, the business will use the facility to grow and nurture hemp plugs that can supply hemp farms throughout Virginia and the Southeast. An expansion of operations is expected to start in the second to third year when crude cannabidiol, usually known as CBD, can be sold to other businesses that could refine it for product use such as oils, edibles and cosmetics. In years three and four, a clean room will be established to produce and refine its own oil.

Lee, 38, said about his involvement in hemp, "I've been in the cannabis industry in some form or another another for the past 18 years. I've done consulting on large-scale indoor grows in Colorado and California."

Further, Lee said he's been involved in ancillary products, such as specializing smoking pipes for vape shops.

The company name, he said as an aside, comes from the name of his daughter, Bonnie, who will be 2 years old in February.

"The initial cost of the plant can cost \$8,000 to \$10,000 per acre to grow," Lee continued. "We'll manufacture enough to issue on a credit type of system. That helps removes a barrier from entry [into hemp farming.] It kind of allows us to soften that burden."

Depending on a strain, a hemp plant can mature with 120 to 160 days.

The company took possession of the site in mid-October and already has established multiple rows of hemp plants.

As for employment, Lee said that a job fair is planned for this January.

"Farming experience would be very helpful. Having a horticulture background and experience in government compliance for protocols," he said. "A lot of this will be a learning curve. These are not traditional job skills. We're looking for people that want to work. We can teach and train and we really want people that care."

Asked to explain the differences between hemp and marijuana, the latter of which can be used both medically as well as recreationally, Lee explained that while the plants appear quite similar, viewing the buds more closely shows differences. More importantly, the chief difference is in the genetic makeup of the plants. Tetrahydrocannabinol, usually referred to as THC, has the psychotropic ingredient in marijuana and can produce a feeling of being high or peaceful in many users.

Industrial hemp, he continued, has under 0.3 percent of THC.

"Hemp has more CBD and less THC. Marijuana has more THC and less CBD," Lee summarized.

He also noted that the fibrous stalks of hemp plants, which can grow quite tall, may be cultivated to make fibers to create hats, T-shirts and bioplastics. As far back as World War II, hemp was used for rope and riggings. "Hemp for Victory" is the title of an instructional movie about the plants flexible uses.

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Lee said of the reception his company has gotten so far, "The citizens and farmers of Boykins and

Southampton County have been extremely welcoming, which has played a major role in our decision to do business in Boykins. We have also found the economic development team and government officials to be great to work with as we ramp-up operations. We are looking forward to partnering with farmers and organizations in Franklin Southampton so we can play an active role in charitable, community and economic initiatives.”

Naturally, county and FSEDI officials are thrilled by the news of Bon Bon's establishment in Boykins. In statements made through a press release:

“Today’s announcement is a great win for the Southampton County,” said Dallas Jones, Southampton County Board of Supervisors Chairman. “By supporting innovative, locally owned businesses like Bon Bon Farms, we can help bring economic vitality to the Franklin Southampton community.”

“This business attraction project is tremendous news,” said Brian Hedgepeth, FSEDI Board Chairman. “It gives life to a shuttered building in Boykins and provides much-needed jobs and economic vitality for our community.”

“A project like this provides a greater diversity of growing options for farms throughout our region and highlights one of the Commonwealth’s emerging crops, hemp,” said Doug Smith, president and CEO of Hampton Roads Economic Development Alliance.

Jay Brenchick, president and CEO of FSEDI, stated, “Franklin Southampton Economic Development Inc., Virginia Economic Development Partnership, Virginia Career Works – Hampton Roads Region, and Southampton County worked in partnership on this project. The company has received both state and local benefits from the Virginia Enterprise Zone Program, which is administered by the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development and Southampton County, respectively.”