

Beech-Nut plant gets under way

Officials break ground on 13-acre baby food facility expected to add new jobs By Eric Anderson, Deputy business editor

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FLORIDA -- One year and six days after plans were first announced, officials were back in this Montgomery County community Wednesday afternoon for a groundbreaking ceremony at the site of the new Hero/Beech-Nut Nutrition Corp. plant.

If all goes as planned, 18 months from now Hero/Beech-Nut will put the finishing touches on its nearly 13-acre baby food plant, which will replace two outdated plants in nearby Fort Plain and Canajoharie.

The factory will cost \$124 million, although the company could realize taxpayer-funded incentives totaling as much as \$106.5 million.

The building will be energy-efficient and friendly to the environment, said Christoph Rudolf, president and chief executive of Hero/Beech-Nut. Headquarters staff, temporarily in Latham after a move from St. Louis, also will be based here.

Switzerland-based Hero Group has "experienced significant success in markets around the globe," Rudolf said, and he expected it to do the same here.

Although the project preserves 356 jobs and is committed to creating another 135, state Sen. Hugh Farley, R-Niskayuna, said after the event that he expects the growth to be even greater.

"I think this company can bring Beech-Nut to greater heights," Farley said. "They are tough businesspeople."

Hero/Beech-Nut agreed to a number of changes to protect the surrounding environment. Gene Kelly, regional director for the state Department of Environmental Conservation, said the company increased the amount of grassland set aside for the habitat of the Northern Harrier hawk, a protected species.

Rudolf said concern about the environment was also demonstrated in Beech-Nut's efforts to have the new plant certified under the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program of the U.S. Green Building Council.

"Not many manufacturing facilities are built according to LEED standards," he said.

LEED certifications, based on a range of considerations from how energy-efficient a building is to whether it's on a bus line or uses recycled materials, include certified, silver, gold and platinum.

Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, D-Manhattan, who also spoke at the groundbreaking, said he hoped Beech-Nut would seek at least "silver" status under the LEED program.

Rudolf pledged to work with Canajoharie and Fort Plain, where existing Beech-Nut facilities will close after the new plant opens, suggesting the buildings might serve as distribution centers or processing plants.

And he encouraged local companies to bid on future construction contracts. Beech-Nut has already drawn some criticism from labor unions after awarding one contract to an out-of-state firm that employs non-union workers.

"We will always favor qualified New York companies over any others," Rudolf said.

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