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Progress: B.C. could be a leader for food safety

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A three-wheeled plan to make Battle Creek a national leader in food safety is quickly gaining traction.

Battle Creek Unlimited, the city's economic development firm, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, a world-renowned philanthropic organization based here in Battle Creek, are leading the effort to develop a National Center for Food Protection in downtown Battle Creek unlike any other in the nation.

It is a key element in Battle Creek's revitalization that will help protect the global food supply and attract young professionals to the Cereal City, said City Manager Ken Tsuchiyama.

The most unique element of the three-part project is to create an International Food Protection Training Institute that would offer intensive courses in up-to-date training for food inspectors.

"That currently is probably the one part of the center that is furthest along and has the most momentum right now," said Karl Dehn, BCU president and chief executive officer.

The training institute would be the first of its kind in the nation attempting to standardize food inspections and professionalize the industry, said Rick Foster, Kellogg Foundation vice president for programs.

"There's probably 45,000 people in this country inspecting food at one level or another," Foster said. "They are in many, many places where food interacts with people and many of them have little training."

Although the Battle Creek-based Kellogg Co. is not directly involved in the center's development, it could benefit from its existence, said David Mackay, Kellogg president and chief executive officer, after its annual meeting April 24.

A recent salmonella outbreak in peanut butter manufactured at the now-bankrupt Peanut Corp. of America cost the food industry, including Kellogg, hundreds of millions of dollars. It also contributed to 700 reported illnesses and was linked to nine deaths.

The peanut-processing plant was inspected by federal, state and private inspectors. Some of them gave the plant a satisfactory rating while others reported it unsanitary. It used tape to repair machinery, allowed roasted and unroasted peanuts to cross-contaminate, and shipped peanut products that had tested positive and then negative for salmonella, a USA Today report revealed.

"One of the issues we have in food safety in the U.S. is we don't have enough trained, qualified people to do the inspections that are necessary," Mackay said. "Unless we have a training facility to do that that is constantly updating, then you know the U.S. is going to continue to struggle to keep up to date."

Keeping the center in Battle Creek was important to BCU and the Kellogg Foundation, which so far

has given \$2 million to the nonprofit Association of Food and Drug Officials to design a curriculum and run the program. It has promised up to \$5 million to get the program going in its first year, Frost said.

Frost called Battle Creek a "food-rich environment" seated between four major universities and dozens of food producers interested in food safety.

Grand Rapid has its focus on health care and Kalamazoo on pharmaceuticals, but Battle Creek will be a hub for food protection, said Reggie LaGrand, Kellogg Foundation director of greater Battle Creek programming.

"It could be the one place that could propel Michigan through these hard economic times," he said.

The offices of U.S. Rep. Mark Schauer, Sen. Debbie Stabenow and others are working to earmark federal funds for its continued operation, Dehn and Foster said. The money would allow states to send their food inspectors to the training institute.

Up to 10,000 students studying in three- to five-day intervals could be trained annually within the next four to five years, Foster said.

The first class of about 100 will be in July at the McCamly Plaza Hotel, which has recently renovated its top floor overlooking Battle Creek and half of its hotel rooms in golden wheat tones. The program could expand into Western Michigan University's Kendall Center just down the street.

"We're looking forward to it not only for our business, but for other businesses in the area," said Steven Aldridge, McCamly director of sales and marketing.

The National Center for Food Protection would not only create new jobs in Battle Creek -- something BCU would like to see -- but it would better protect those most vulnerable to food-borne illnesses -- namely the children and their caretakers the Kellogg Foundation has vowed to help.

A second part of this three-step plan is to woo a for-profit food testing company to the Battle Creek area that would be affiliated with the center, Dehn said. BCU might have a company secured within the next 60 days.

The Food Testing Center of Excellence would provide testing for food companies within Michigan and throughout the Midwest, potentially bringing 50-60 new jobs to Battle Creek by establishing a laboratory here.

A third element would be to establish an Emerging Technology Accelerator. The public-private initiative would get new technologies in the hands of food companies faster.

Dehn said he hopes to have investments in research this summer to allow the Ann Arbor-based Michigan Aerospace Corp., which has a satellite office in Battle Creek, to develop tests that can detect pathogens quicker, before food leaves the factory.

"We believe capitalizing on our food science capabilities in Battle Creek and the knowledge base we have here gives us a great opportunity for economic development," Dehn said.

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