

Flash (freeze) forward New food processing center equipment better for produce's flavor, nutrients and — hopefully — sales

By RICHIE DAVIS Recorder Staff

It's that time of year when broccoli, peppers and carrots are coming forth, and the Franklin County Food Processing Center is freezing vegetables from area farms for colleges, schools and other institutions around the region.

And now, the Greenfield center's long-awaited quickfreeze equipment is being prepared, to make that frozen produce more palatable to those wholesale buyers.

The "individual quick freeze" (IQF) equipment, which the Franklin County Community Development Corp. bought used for about \$16,500 but will cost \$60,000 to \$70,000 by the time it's installed the second week in September, according to CDC Executive Director John Waite, can drop the temperature of produce from 70 degrees to -15 degrees in a minute or two with the addition of liquid nitrogen, and it's favored by institutional food buyers over freezing that leaves cut-up carrots or broccoli frozen in a clump.

The CDC, which has been cutting up vegetables and freezing them overnight in five-pound bags in what amounts to slow motion, plans to switch to the industry standard even before it has freezer space to handle the 4,000-pound daily production rate that the flash-freezer will allow. That's double the kitchen's current capability.

The flash-freeze process also leaves more of the vegetables' flavor and nutrients intact, say food processing center staff.

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The center, which has been trying to raise money and shopping for the IQF for three years, is now putting out specifications for a 4,000-square-foot freezer and cooler to be housed in an addition to the CDC's Wells Street building. The new storage facility, Waite said, is estimated to cost \$400,000 to \$450,000, with groundbreaking planned for October and operation scheduled for next spring. The freezer is being designed to hold 96 pallets, each of which can hold 63 20-pound boxes, with room for another 42 pallets in a refrigerator and dry storage area planned for a space adjacent to the shared commercial kitchen where a crew chops, washes, blanches and freezes the vegetables.

The new cold storage will be paid for from a \$250,000 U.S. Department of Agriculture loan as well as a state grant that Waite said is pending.

He said that with the quick-freeze equipment, the hope is to process more than the 96 pallets of frozen produce, shipping it out as soon as it's frozen to Sodexo, distributors to the Springfield and Holyoke public schools, and Chartwell's Dining Service, as well as to area colleges, including Williams College.

The center now has only a six-pallet storage freezer, along with a rented 20-pallet freezer in its parking lot, but he said the new addition will be much more convenient as well as more energy efficient. Until the new storage area is ready next spring, Waite said, the plan is for the CDC to contract with a commercial freezer storage company, Pioneer Valley Refrigerated Warehouse in Chicopee or Preferred Freezer Services in Westfield.

The 13-year-old Food Processing Center has been ramping up its kitchen to extend the sales capability of area farmers and selling to year-round institutional buyers like schools and colleges, most of which in the region have signed on for the “Real Food Challenge” to increase the percentage of “organic, fair trade, local or humanely raised” foods to their campuses by 2020.

At Hampshire College, which has committed to growing 100 percent of its food locally, Waite said the plan is for the food processing center to cut up and freeze produce grown on the Amherst campus’ own farm.

“This has been holding us up,” said Waite in describing the CDC’s efforts to assemble funding for the flash-freeze and storage equipment. “We have customers lined up,” including Chartwell’s and Sodexo, with plans to ship 20-pound boxes of frozen carrots, peppers broccoli and possibly green beans from six or seven farms around the region. The center staff is also looking into the best way to prepare potatoes for freezing, since that’s also an in-demand item in some college food service kitchens. The CDC, which earlier this year hired a marketing specialist for its food processing center, sold 35,000 pounds of broccoli and peppers in 2012, and after slowing down last year to process 10,000 pounds in order to concentrate on planning, marketing and improving quality, hopes to ramp up to process 200,000 pounds of vegetables in its first year of flash freezing.

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