

# AGRINEWS

## Agriculture R&D is priority for business development group

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Paul Borek, of the DeKalb County Economic Development Corp., welcomes the Syngenta R&D Innovation Center to DeKalb County as Warren Kruger, Judd Maxwell and Eric Boeck, all of Syngenta, look on. Borek said attracting research and development business to the county is a top priority and that the Syngenta facility will continue the tradition of agricultural innovation in the area. (AgriNews photo/Jeannine Otto)

**MALTA, Ill. —** Everyone knows the benefits that agriculture research and development and innovation can bring to farmers. But what role can agriculture R&D play in a region's economic development?

One of the voices welcoming the Syngenta R&D Innovation Center to DeKalb County belonged to Paul Borek, the executive director of the DeKalb County Economic Development Corp.

“In expanding and diversifying the DeKalb County economy, our role at DCEDC, there is no greater target than agricultural research and development,” said Borek as he joined Syngenta representatives and others from the local community at the official groundbreaking ceremony for the 88-acre Syngenta R&D Innovation Center.

Borek sat down with AgriNews to talk about the role that agriculture research and development and global agribusinesses play in economic development in places like DeKalb County.

**While research and development is a logical target of economic development groups, agricultural R&D doesn't seem to have been a big priority for economic development firms until recently.**

“You are absolutely right. Our organization has been in business for 34 years and most of our work has been the recruitment and expansion of industry in the urban areas or on the edge of the urban areas. As we did some planning for the future, we identified several target industries that are critical to expanding and diversifying DeKalb County.

“Research and development has always been a significant goal of ours. There are significant resources to support research and development. At the same time, agribusiness is diversifying and farmers are investing in diversified businesses. It became clear to us that DeKalb County already is a Mecca for agribusiness and we have the ability to attract more agribusiness.”

**Why is research and development such a priority for your corporation when it comes to attracting new business?**

“It is a priority because of the research and development potential at Northern Illinois University. NIU has all of the sciences, engineering and computer technology and software. There are significant research assets and there is potential to grow that area of business and strengthen networks between the university and business and industry, like Syngenta. Innovation has always sparked investment, growth and opportunity in DeKalb County, so we should strive for additional research and development.”

**Tell us a little bit more about the Syngenta project. When and how did it start?**

“We started in late 2018, early 2019. A commercial Realtor was looking for sites, semi rural and business park sites, initially for an international facility and it was confidential. But it was an international facility and it needed to have a relationship to agriculture and an ability to serve as a visitor complex.

“Our organization maintains inventories of available properties, mostly in the urban areas, so we put them in touch with sites. They used their resources to identify ag sites, which was their primary interest. We made sure that the Realtor knew we had some tools that could assist and support business development.

“Agriculture is a significant industry and significant in our eyes and we did everything we could to support this Syngenta project. We have an enterprise zone program that was created in 2016 to attract business and industry. We amended the boundaries of the program to include this site and to support the development of the research center.”

**Does this kind of agribusiness investment in DeKalb County raise the visibility of the county to attract more agribusiness investment, especially following the announcements of other projects in the county, like the Facebook data center in DeKalb and the Ferrara candy company distribution center, also in DeKalb?**

“Absolutely. I think success breeds success. We used to average about 35 projects that we would compete for in a year. This year already we have 45 and the year is just half over. What do we owe that input in economic interest? Part of it certainly may be accelerated business recovery from COVID, but part of it, I think, has to be the awareness of all the other projects.”

**Tell us a little bit more about the DeKalb County Economic Development Corp. What does the DCEDC do?**

“The DCEDC is a public-private partnership dedicated to expanding and diversifying the economy in DeKalb County. We work to recruit businesses and expand local business and also to make sure the business climate is productive for companies and reasonable. Part of that includes maintaining incentive programs and administering incentive programs to enable us to compete with other locations for business.

“We also work with our colleagues in education and professional services to insure there is an adequate labor force available for companies. We are made up of county government, municipalities, taxing bodies and 200 private businesses, institutions and individuals. The goal is to expand the county economy and improve prosperity.”