

By Jim Wright

Community & People

Sprout Food Hub and Marketplace has a really grand opening in Little Falls

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Helping cut the ribbon at the grand opening of the Sprout Food Hub and Marketplace in Little Falls, April 1, were (from left): Minnesota Commissioner of Agriculture Dave Frederickson, USDA Rural Development State Director Colleen Landkamer, 8th District Rep. Rick Nolan, Sen. Amy Klobuchar, the Sprout Food Hub and Marketplace founder Arlene Jones, USDA National Under Secretary Lisa Mensah and Cheryal Hills, executive director of the Region Five Development Commission.

The new Sprout Food Hub and Growers and Makers Marketplace celebrated its grand opening, April 1 and 2, in the Little Falls Manufacturing Development Center. The former Crestliner plant now houses 23 businesses.

The magnitude of the enterprise was underscored by the presence of U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, 8th District Rep. Rick Nolan, USDA Undersecretary Lisa Mensah, Minnesota Commissioner of Agriculture Dave Frederickson and USDA Rural Development State Director Colleen Landkamer.

The Morrison County Board of Commissioners and County Administrator Deb Gruber attended, along with Little Falls City Administrator Jon Radermacher and several other city officials, as well as many other agency and civic leaders.

More than 200 people were seated in the audience during the ribbon-cutting ceremony, with uncounted more standing around or shopping and coming and going throughout the day, April 1. More than 300 people were estimated to be in the new marketplace from 9 a.m. – 3 p.m. that day.

A second market was held Saturday, April 2, from 9 a.m. – 3 p.m., with an official door count tallying 219 visitors.

“We hope this is the model for the rest of the state and the country,” Klobuchar told the crowd.

“Everyone can benefit from the savings — the grower and the buyer — with food not having to be transported long distances,” Nolan said.

Sprout is a regional food hub, distributing throughout the Minnesota region, as well as the local market.

The Little Falls facility will serve four primary functions: As a year-round market for growers and artists to sell their locally produced food and artworks to Central Minnesota residents and tourists; to provide a local foods processing facility for local growers to use to can, freeze and otherwise process value-added products; to house a cooking demonstration kitchen; and facilitate the wholesale gathering together, storage, and distribution of local foods as part of the Sprout Food Hub for institutional sales.

It is expected to benefit local small farmers who use natural and sustainable methods, by buying their produce and selling it to schools, hospitals, restaurants and other customers throughout mid-Minnesota.

“Thank you, Arlene (Jones) for your vision, and for this powerful institution called Sprout,” Mensah said to the applauding audience.

“We are passionate about building the local foods economy — supporting our small family farms,” Jones said.

She and her husband Bob co-founded the Sprout Food Hub.

The couple began distributing their and others’ local produce in 2005, from The Farm on St. Mathias, south of Brainerd.

She said 70 local growers already are selling to the region’s Sprout Food Hub, which distributed more than 100,000 pounds of food last year.

Jones shared the accolades, singling out the work of Cheryal Hills, executive director of the Region Five Development Commission, one of the major backers of the Sprout marketplace, as part of the Resilient Region Initiative to sustainably plan region-wide infrastructure, including local foods.

“It’s all about people coming together,” Landkamer said. “Making a difference and improving the quality of life and financial stability for people in this region.”

Pillager area vegetable farmers, Shane and Louise Johns, and representatives from other region’s food hubs, also spoke about the Little Falls food hub’s capability, during the ceremony.

One of the farmers selling in the Sprout Marketplace, Russell Kleinschmidt of rural Staples, was an example of the kind of growers sought for the Sprout Food Hub and Marketplace. He said, “Kleinschmidt Farms uses holistic, natural, and sustainable methods to grow and harvest produce.”

The marketplace’s variety was obvious as Little Falls resident Neil Vonderhaar’s Fusion Glass featured artistic fishing spoons, jewelry, bird feeders and nesting houses. “I did pretty well today, better than I expected,” Vonderhaar said. “A lot of people came through.”

Frederickson got into the spirit of the marketplace, buying a watercolor painting from local artist Kathy Braud. “Just got to have it,” he said.

Another shopper, Robin Schmidt, said, “I’m so excited. I love it. It’s about time we got something like this.”

Some of the market's locally raised or handmade retail goods included custom jewelry; canned pickles, salsa and beets; handmade mohair goods from angora goats; homemade chocolates and truffles; blacksmith creations; barn wood picture frames and birdhouses; herbs; canned goods, breads, cookies and other baked goods; jam and preserves; soothing and pain relieving natural salves; honey and sunflower oil; smoked wild fish from Alaska (caught and processed by Cushing area residents); hand-harvested wild rice; organic vegetable starter plants; customized health products; ceramic and glass birdbaths; handcrafted kitchen cutting boards; organic bath, body and home products. Considerably more produce is expected in season.

Information booths included the Little Falls Purple Carrot Food Co-op; Ag Centric agricultural education; Central Lakes College's grape growing and wine making education programs; Minnesotans for Healthy Kids Coalition; the Choose Health program; Rich Prairie Chiropractic Center; and Fortress Fit health and fitness programs.

Carol Anderson, executive director of Community Development of Morrison County, cited other support involved in the planning and funding, including the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, the USDA, Region Five, the Initiative Foundation, the city of Little Falls, and the National Joint Powers Alliance.

Many toured the newly licensed, large, stainless steel, processing facility and demonstration kitchen, with vast freezer space, made possible by all the planning and funding. It is available for use by anyone, gardeners as well as farmers.

"It's a great turnout," Morrison County Board Chairman Randy Winscher said.

"Nowadays, people want fresh, healthy food, and here it is, and so much more; everyone should definitely come see this."

Mayor Greg Zylka said, "It's great for Little Falls and the entire area, and will bring shoppers here who will spend throughout the city."

A marketplace schedule has not been determined yet. Updates will be published in the *Morrison County Record*, and online at www.sproutmn.com.