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J. Kings, LI Farm Bureau establish agri-park

by John Callegari

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John King was faced with a dilemma recently when he purchased a former Blackman Plumbing Supplies building he had been eyeing for eight years that was larger than what he needed it for: What to do with that extra space?

After contemplating starting a paper company, King, founder of J. Kings, Inc., decided to go a different route that earned him thanks from people as far away as Albany: renting space in the Calverton facility to the Long Island Farm Bureau for cold storage and processing of locally produced fruits, vegetables, wines and fish.

"This is an opportunity we haven't had out here," said Joe Gergela, executive director of the Long Island Farm Bureau. "We've always been good farmers here, but the problem is we don't market well. This will assist us in better marketing what we produce here and giving our crops longer shelf life, making farmland more profitable."

King illustrated the need for a regional agricultural terminal by recalling memories of last year's Hurricane Irene. Farmers lost a large portion of their crops in the storm due to not having a cool place to store them that could have increased shelf life. Should another hurricane threaten the region, King said farmers could pick their crops ahead of time and store them at the facility, affording them the ability to sell the produce after the storm subsided.

The 108,000-square-foot facility, purchased by J. Kings a little over a month ago, will be split up between J. King's produce-cutting operations and space for local produce, wines and seafood.

About 30,000 square feet of the building will be leased to the Long Island Farm Bureau and 10,000 square feet to Long Island wineries for processing and cold storage, which will increase shelf life for produce by about a week.

An 8,000-to-10,000-square-foot office area and conference center will be set up in the front of the building that farmers, winemakers or fishermen could use to meet with each other or clients. Letting J. Kings handle distribution of the local produce is an option to farmers, but will not be a requirement for storing food at the facility, King noted.

J. King's Bay Shore facility, currently home to the company's produce cutting facility, will be utilized entirely for its burgeoning Crazy Cooks Kitchen business – fully prepared meals made by chefs sold in supermarkets. In total, J. Kings will be hiring 60 new employees between the Bay Shore and Calverton buildings.



Setting up an agri-park on Long Island was one of several priority projects set last year by the Long Island Regional Economic Development Council. Long Island received \$500,000 from the state to research the creation of a facility, which was originally planned to be a multimillion-dollar facility on the grounds of Enterprise Park in Calverton. But just starting to research the concept would have taken too long, King noted.

"I read in the newspaper what they were looking to do, so I called Joe [Gergela] and said 'Look, you know you need this. I know you need this. I have the space, so let's just do it,'" he said.

Lt. Gov. Robert Duffy, on hand for the ribbon-cutting ceremony opening the facility, praised that mentality and said the building would allow Long Island to produce even more fresh food, wines and fish.

Agriculture represents a \$4.5 to \$5 billion industry in New York, and Suffolk County is currently the leading agricultural producing county by value in the entire state.

King said he expects to have the facility fully outfitted with the needed equipment to begin storing and processing produce within a month or so.

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