

## Foodlink, officials celebrate Community Kitchen groundbreaking

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Officials take part in the ceremonial “apple slicing” at Wednesday’s groundbreaking celebration at Foodlink. The new Community Kitchen is scheduled to be completed by Fall 2016.

A vision that dates back decades took another step closer to reality Wednesday at Foodlink.

The regional food hub celebrated the groundbreaking of its \$4.6 million Community Kitchen – a 28,000-square-foot space that soon will be filled with state-of-the-art equipment and enable Foodlink to significantly expand its services and programs.

“Today represents a monumental day in Foodlink’s history,” Executive Director Julia Tedesco said. “Our kitchen is a vital community asset and one that our founder, Tom Ferraro, had always envisioned expanding and moving to our operational headquarters. Having all of our dedicated employees finally working under one roof will strengthen our commitment to Foodlink’s vision of a healthy, hunger-free community.”

Numerous staff and board members joined Tedesco for the celebration, which also welcomed local, state and federal officials and major stakeholders to the new facility at 1999 Mt. Read Boulevard. Major funders for the project include: Empire State Development funding through the Finger Lakes Regional Economic Development Council (\$1 million), Greater Rochester Health Foundation (\$650K), The Wegman Family Charitable Foundation (a \$500K Matching Challenge, which helped to mobilize community support for the project), and ESL Charitable Foundation (\$200K).

The Foodlink Community Kitchen project aligns with the focus areas of the Finger Lakes Regional Economic Development Council and Upstate Revitalization Initiative (URI), as well as the Rochester-Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative. Food must play a key role in community development, poverty reduction and economic mobility for our region. \$250,000 of the \$1 million in Empire State Development Funding came via the URI, a program designed to stimulate upstate economies.

The Community Kitchen will foster “pathways to prosperity” by leveraging food to build community health and nutrition and to reduce poverty via targeted job creation in the food and culinary industry.



Mayor Lovely Warren speaks at Foodlink's Community Kitchen groundbreaking Wednesday.

“Foodlink has been at the center of the battle against hunger in the Finger Lakes region for more than 30 years, and today we are honored to help a great institution extend its reach and impact even further,” said New York State Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul. “With our investment and the expansion of the Foodlink kitchen, we also make this a hub of regional agricultural activity and job development, and the result will be a healthier community.”

Foodlink aims to complete the facility by this fall and have it up and running for the school year, when the kitchen is busiest. Several area charter schools, after-school programs and extended-day sites partner with Foodlink to provide healthy meals for thousands of Rochester’s low-income children. When school lets out, the kitchen serves up food for Summer Meals sites and other local camps and programs.

Over time, Foodlink expects to triple its capacity, which equates to more local children eating healthy meals. Numerous studies have recognized a proven link between better nutrition and improved educational performance.

“Ensuring that all of Rochester’s children have access to enough nutritious meals is vital to the overall health of our community,” said John Urban, president and CEO, Greater Rochester Health Foundation. “Because this offered us a unique opportunity to impact the health status and quality of life of children in Rochester, we decided to award Foodlink’s Community Kitchen an atypically large grant outside our standard grant cycles.”

Aside from expanding meal production and gaining efficiencies by finally operating out of a single location, Foodlink is eager to expand two other initiatives: Local Value-Added Processing and Culinary Workforce Training.

A concerted effort has been made in recent years to purchase apples from local growers and pre-slice them to make them more appealing for children. The technique, known as Value-Added Processing, has been hampered by limited processing space and the prohibitive cost of equipment. In the new kitchen, apples will be sliced at a rate of 24 boxes per hour, rather than 2, and other types of produce will be brought into the fold.

Finally, Foodlink will use its new space to develop a one-of-a-kind work experience program. Wegmans Food Markets has lent the expertise of its staff to help with a kitchen design that will take into account work flow, food safety, training capacity, and scalability for growth. The company also will help to develop the kitchen’s culinary training program.

“The way out of poverty is a job,” said Wegmans CEO Danny Wegman. “There are culinary jobs available in our community, but our community also needs a workforce trained to fill those jobs. This program will go a long way to close that gap.”



Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul gives her remarks Wednesday at Foodlink.