

Home / Maryland Independent / News / Local News

http://www.somdnews.com/independent/news/local/county-seeks-to-be-new-home-for-agricultural-research-agencies/article_b165af86-bb1d-5b85-9a49-8b9d20975a6a.html

County seeks to be new home for agricultural research agencies

By Paul Lagasse plagasse@somdnews.com 9 hrs ago



A 10-acre property on U.S. 301 and Regency Place could be the new home of two USDA agencies if an expression of interest submitted by the county's economic development department moves ahead.

STAFF PHOTO BY PAUL LAGASSE

The Charles County Department of Economic Development is encouraging the United States Department of Agriculture to consider White Plains as the new home for two agricultural research institutes that will soon be moving out of Washington, D.C.

The county is proposing a 10-acre parcel at the corner of U.S. 301 and Regency Place as the headquarters for the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and the Economic Research Service (ERS). Both agencies are being relocated outside of Washington as part of an agency-wide

reorganization undertaken by Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue.

“Charles County is well-positioned for an opportunity like this,” County Administrator Michael D. Mallinoff said in a county news release. “We have the advantage of a strategic location in the Washington, D.C. metro area, with a lower cost of doing business and a high quality of life.”

According to the USDA’s announcement seeking “expressions of interest” from state and local governments, industry, academia and other interested organizations, the new NIFA facility would need to be approximately 90,000 square feet and able to house around 360 employees. The new ERS facility would need to be up to 70,000 square feet and capable of housing up to 260 employees.

The county’s five-page submission emphasized the county’s “highly educated workforce” and noted that electric and utility costs are “competitive” with other communities in the region.

“Charles County presents an opportunity to preserve an incumbent workforce, and its institutional knowledge, while lowering the USDA’s cost to do business,” the county’s prospectus said.

The proposal also touted the county’s “relatively lower cost of living” and its range of housing options and recreational activities.

With regard to transportation logistics, the prospectus pointed out that the county sits “in the center of the Baltimore/Washington/Richmond corridor” and stressed the proximity of its northern urban area to Baltimore and Annapolis.

USDA’s call for submissions emphasized that travel and logistical requirements were “critically important” for a successful bid, including being located within a “reasonable distance of a commercial primary airport” and commuting options.

Other considerations that USDA will weigh in considering locations include the community and quality of life, capital and operating costs and existing informational technology infrastructure.

NIFA’s mission is to support agricultural research, education and extension services. ERS conducts peer-reviewed research in agricultural policy and economics issues to help inform policy decisions.

Darrell Brown, director of the economic development department, said that the missions of the two agencies are a good fit with the county’s overall strategic plans for economic development.

“Both [NIFA] and [ERS] fit within our targeted industries of scientific research and development services,” Brown said. “That’s an additional reason why we submitted our expression of interest.”

A recent study conducted by the economic development department found that around 7,000 county residents are employed in R&D, engineering and computing. Over three-quarters of them commute outside the county for employment.

The county’s agricultural business development manager Martin Proulx led the three-week team effort to prepare the expression of interest, which had to be limited to five pages.

“With the five page limit we really had to focus,” Proulx said. “But we did get everything in there that needed to be.”

Proulx said that the county understands that the selected site is ready to be built on.

“It would be a very interesting fit there, which is why we were interested in it,” Proulx said.

Meinhardt Properties owns the 10-acre commercial property, which has a 25,000 square-foot office and warehouse structure that according to the county is scheduled for demolition.

The prospectus describes the existing foundation as “solid and ready for building a new contingent space or multiple office buildings with ample parking.”

The USDA has said that it is undertaking the relocation in part “To improve [its] ability to attract and retain highly qualified staff with training and interests in agriculture, many of whom come from land-grant universities.”

The agency said that it has experienced “significant turnover in some positions” and has had difficulty recruiting new employees in part because of the capital’s high cost of living and long commute times for many employees.

In addition to fitting well with the county’s plans to attract high-tech R&D businesses, the economic development department believes that having two major federal agricultural agencies in the county would also directly benefit local farmers and entrepreneurs, and could even help the county become a hub of agricultural innovation.

“Having the agencies here will have a huge economic development impact,” Brown said. “That’s why our submission is competitive, though admittedly it’s a bit of a long shot. There are other counties that are no doubt looking too.”

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