

# **New State Farmers Market at Columbia - *agriculture's wish comes true***

Try to think back to when you or your child wanted something desperately for Christmas - perhaps for more than one year. In my family this year, it's Julius, our fourteen-year-old who has said for years that he *needs* a phone. Well, I'm sure he *wants* a phone. And maybe this will be the year.

The agriculture industry in South Carolina has had a new State Farmers Market for Columbia on its wish list for several years. I guess enough of you wrote Santa Claus about it because this is the year for the new market. Actually, it will open in 2008, but 2005 is the year that it will be left under the tree.

Our relocation proposal was actually approved earlier this year, but on December 5th, we held a press conference to announce plans for the new Farmers Market. We used the time to highlight some of the features of the new market.

One of the most noticeable things about the new market is its size compared to the current market on Bluff Road - 196 acres versus 54 acres. The extra area will have several uses. One will be the addition of a retail shopping area. The emphasis of this development will be a family-friendly destination with several amenities, such as a restaurant featuring South Carolina products as well as a garden center.

Several stalls in the retail buildings will be built to accommodate vendors who might locate a meat market or sell other non-produce goods. One of the more successful vendors on the Raleigh, NC Farmers Market is a seafood distributor. An added benefit of this new retail area will be getting the consumer closer to the producer; a shopping environment a little less hurried than the normal options, where people can learn more about from where and from whom their food is coming. Making this connection is always a priority for the Department of Agriculture.

The extra space at the new market will allow the design of the same amount of trucker shed area as we have now, but in three separate sheds rather than the one big shed. This is less costly to maintain during the off-peak time of year and should be more shopper-friendly. Another major change is the relocation of our food safety laboratory to the new market property. The property where our lab is located currently is being sold by the State, so it is a natural that we build the new lab adjacent to the market.

One key feature about the new market is that it breaks new ground in market ownership. We will have five of our major wholesale

vendors relocating to Shop Road who will be investing in their own facilities. Currently the State owns all the facilities and all vendors lease from us. This new public private combination of ownership will be the only one of its kind in the country. The result is that Agriculture can be proud of its new Farmers Market and also proud of the fact that it is costing the State less than 25% of the total investment. Richland County purchased the land for the new site on Shop Road, and the University of South Carolina is buying the current market property at the appraised value.

The scope of the market will expand as well as its size. We are discussing a community-minded initiative to become more involved with the efforts of Harvest Hope Food Bank in Columbia.

A designated collection point on the market will permit vendors to more actively donate produce and other goods to this worthwhile cause. Harvest Hope currently rents warehouse space from the Department of Agriculture at the Pee Dee State Farmers Market in Florence.

Well, if Santa bought us the Market in 2005, when do we get to use it? Groundbreaking should be at the Shop Road site in the spring of 2006. If the site prep and utility work goes well, the building construction could begin in the fall. This schedule allows for a few glitches along the way and to have the Market open by January 2008.

In making remarks at the press conference, I said there was a long list of individuals and organizations that should be recognized for persevering to see this new market become a reality. I am confident that the finished product will be worthy of their hard work.

So, agriculture got what it has needed for a long time. I'll let you know how Julius and his telephone wish come out.

And, from my family in Bowman and my family at the Department of Agriculture, we hope your Christmas Season is very special.

**Hugh E. Weathers, Commissioner**