

BUSINESS

State board OKs \$60M wastewater pipe for West Michigan dairies, food businesses

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The state's economic development board has approved a \$60 million grant for a wastewater infrastructure project in the Muskegon area that several food-processing businesses say is needed to expand their operations in West Michigan.

The Michigan Strategic Fund Board approved the taxpayer grant Wednesday to help fund the construction of a wastewater line between Coopersville in Ottawa County and the city of Muskegon's under-capacity wastewater treatment plant in Muskegon County.

Applegate Dairy and Swanson Pickle in Ravenna and Continental Dairy, DeVries Meats and dairy giant fairlife in Coopersville plan expansions of their food and dairy processing capabilities once the wastewater pipeline is built, according to the Michigan Economic Development Corp.

The five agri-businesses will make a combined investment of "at least" \$187 million and create 145 new jobs, according to an MEDC memo to the Michigan Strategic Fund board.

The state board awarded the \$60 million Strategic Site Readiness Program grant, which comes from the state's Strategic Outreach and Attraction Reserve Fund to support economic development, to the Southeast Regional Force Main project to provide wastewater service upgrades.

The project also will benefit the municipalities of the Coopersville, Polkton Charter Township, Ravenna Township and the Village of Ravenna, according to the MEDC>

At last week's MSF board meeting, Phil LaMothe, plant manager of fairlife in Coopersville, said the city's limited wastewater capacity is holding the dairy back from expanding its milk product production, which it needs to do to meet demand.

"We have expansion plans for additional lines, additional production, but we are currently out of capacity," LaMothe said. "Throughout the whole supply chain network, we can't make our products fast enough. With these expansion plans and the infrastructure and wastewater being our limiting factor, this project is critical for us to continue to grow."

The wastewater pipeline project, which will cost \$65 million with fairlife contributing \$5 million, will be complete in 2025.

Katie Hensley, chief financial officer of Swanson Pickle Co. in Ravenna, also said the wastewater infrastructure limits her family-owned pickle company's growth.

Hensley and her brothers, the fourth-generation owners, have plans of expanding beyond growing and pickling cucumbers and get into direct processing and packaging, she said.

"If we had access to this wastewater line, we would be able to add more value right here in the eastern part of Muskegon County, rather than moving to a new site or even outside of Michigan," Hensley said.

Swanson Pickle, which ferments cucumbers in large outdoor tanks, has to have wastewater hauled by truck to Muskegon, Hensley said.

"Rather than haul the waste that we're currently creating we'd just put it right into the line," she said.

Politics Editor Chad Livengood contributed.

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