

Group Action Brings Outside Interest In Local Businesses

by Nathan Meunier

HARDWICK — The Center for a Bio-based Economy is firing-up efforts to convene a broad base of stakeholders and entrepreneurs in Hardwick and the surrounding area to spur continued growth and development of the local sustainable food system. The recent success of a series of tours drawing investors and lenders to the community is expected to play an increasing role in channeling outside enthusiasm and support into local food and agricultural business in the region.

In recent months, CBE sponsored small tours to local businesses in and around Hardwick, but a larger gathering organized by the nonprofit on July 1 brought over 30 investors, lenders, and foundations to the area. As sustainable food and agricultural business continues to grow locally, a substantial amount of funding and support is going to be needed, according to CBE president Tom Stearns.

"It's critical to have these lending institutions aware of the need,

getting to meet the entrepreneurs, and learning about how those needs might be unique," he said. "It's a great position to be in as a business to have lenders wanting to talk to you; it's more often the other way around.

"In this case the buzz it's starting to generate is such that these lenders would be crazy not to get involved with what's happening here because it's so darn exciting."

Throughout the day, the group toured Applecheek Farm in Hyde Park, Jasper Hill Farm in Greensboro, Vermont Soy and Vermont Natural Coatings in the Hardwick Industrial Park, and then moved on to Claire's Restaurant and Bar on Main Street before wrapping up with a meeting next door at the new CBE office space. At each location, business owners gave a tour and talked about their challenges, opportunities they saw in future growth, and financing, said Stearns. They also spoke about how their business fit into the web of other local sustainable food and agricultural efforts.

The goal, he said, was for investors to walk away feeling each business they visited was part of a cohesive group with many more members in it, since the region is so rich with entrepreneurship. Stearns said the tour approach is a great way to bring everyone together and foster some unique opportunities for area business growth.

The walkthroughs are also a unique opportunity, since many businesses don't give tours of their facilities to just anyone, he said. Stearns plans to plan additional tours. Though declining to speak about specifics, he said there are already a lot of significant partnerships and investments forming as a result of the latest gathering.

"When we join together this way and collaborate, we are so much bigger than the sum of our parts," he said. "We couldn't have gotten these people to come and visit any one of our places individually, but the enthusiasm our collaboration inspires is every attractive, and it's contagious."