



NEDCO
ASSISTANT
DIRECTOR
SARAI
JOHNSON

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THE COOLEST THING IN TOWN

Springfield works on a foodie new attraction BY SHANNON FINNELL

In some circles, on some topics, some people make fun of Springfield. But Eugene's neighbor to the east has some pretty sweet attributes, as anyone who's spent a day on foot in the city can tell you. And Springfield is getting even more flavorful with the addition of Sprout!, a community food hub set to open in the fall of 2012.

The Neighborhood Economic Development Corporation (NEDCO) has long been a positive, innovative feather in Springfield's cap, but Sprout! has the potential to make Eugeneans drool.

NEDCO Assistant Director Sarai Johnson says the project, in the soon-to-be remodeled building that was First Christian Church in Springfield, will have three main components: a year-round farmers market, an industrial central kitchen and an expansion of NEDCO's Hatch business incubator program.

"So far we're in the design and development phase," Johnson says, which involves making a plan to modify the building while preserving some of its architectural features. Johnson says the plan is to keep the "classic sanctuary style" of the church while knocking down some walls to make a modern kitchen. The remodeling will also provide space for at least two anchor businesses.

Sprout!'s kitchen, which will be able to accommodate up to five businesses simultaneously, is the focus of many of the renovations. And even though it's months from opening, other Springfield business owners are already singing its praises. John Patrick, who owns Devour, says the kitchen would have been an incredible resource for him when he was starting his business.

"Right now there's nothing quite like Sprout!" Patrick says. High health standards make finding affordable kitchen space a challenge for new business owners focused on the bottom line, he says, and that's "a daunting task for anyone who's going to open a street food business or a restaurant."

Patrick says he thinks that having Sprout! at the old church on 4th and A will create a "commercial Mecca" for vendors in the area, cultivating a whole new central location for Springfield and Eugene foodies.

Leda Hermecz has grown her business with the help of NEDCO's Hatch program, and she says she's excited about Sprout! because it will be able to specialize in helping new businesses related to food. Hermecz owns Food Industry Resources for Sustainable Transitions (FIRST), which helps food businesses reduce waste in ways that increase profits.

Part of what Hatch has done for Hermecz and FIRST is provide affordable office space downtown, but Hermecz says that what's been even better for her is the support that she's received when meeting with NEDCO staff to talk about ideas and obstacles. "That's where I feel like every cent of rent is going to way more than office space because I get that support," she says.

Johnson says that as Sprout! grows, she and her NEDCO colleagues hope to offer more and more of that support to food-centered businesses, through avenues like workshops and one-on-one work with businesses, and by helping clients access safe loan products that won't take advantage of them.

And that sort of support makes all the difference to businesses like FIRST. Hermecz says, "I feel lucky to be in Springfield." ■



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