

The Herald-Sun

UNC initiative brings together students, companies, communities

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CHAPEL HILL — While doing research on a proposed new facility that would turn hog waste into energy in one eastern North Carolina county, Carolyn Fryberger found that one question often came up: What about the odor?

Fryberger said she researched about 15 waste-to-energy facilities around the country. She did the work for Duplin County economic development leaders, who want to understand the impacts of a possible hog-waste-to-energy plant.

A recent graduate from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Department of City & Regional Planning master's degree program, Fryberger did the work as part of the N.C. Strategic Economic Growth initiative that aims to help revitalize and grow economically distressed areas in the state.

LaChaun Banks, the program's economic development director, said the initiative has worked to help distressed areas by pairing UNC-Chapel Hill master's of business administration students with private company leaders, by sending students to create economic development plans for communities, and through research.

The program, which is an initiative of the Frank Hawkins Kenan Institute for Private Enterprise, has been awarded a third year of funding as part of a five-year, \$642,949 federal grant, said Dwayne Pinkney, vice provost of finance and academic planning for UNC-Chapel Hill. That was matched by \$1 million from the Kenan Institute.

Pinkney and others spoke about the program Wednesday in a presentation to U.S. Rep. G.K. Butterfield, D-1st. As a representative of eastern North Carolina, Butterfield's presence was important Wednesday since the region was a focus of the program's economic development work, Pinkney said.

Butterfield represents a group of counties largely in the northeastern part of the state. He picked up part of Durham County after redistricting was done based on the 2010 U.S. Census.

Butterfield said he thought it was "heartwarming" to hear new economic development ideas the area in. Before it included parts of Durham, Butterfield said his district ranked as one of the poorest in the country.

"I did not expect to see such a powerful presentation that you brought forward," he said.

Also presenting Wednesday was Chris Long, a Kenan-Flagler Business School master's of business administration student. Long worked to develop an inventory and cost tracking system for the eastern North Carolina start-up company Shure Foods, which is working to build a business around a new way of processing crab meat.

Shure Foods President Gabe Dough said he won a patent for processing raw crab meat that will allow it to be cooked in a wider variety of ways. Right now, he said, unshelled crab meat is primarily picked out by hand after boiling. He said his process allows for the crab to be extracted raw and structured so it's usable in a wider range of cooking applications -- from sautéed to breaded to fried.

He said the company is just beginning production in Washington, N.C. He said it is targeting having the product commercially available later this month.

"The company is now receiving crab as we speak," Long said. "The actual (inventory tracking system) that we made is being used right now as crab comes in."

Fryberger said her project this summer was to help Duplin County officials understand the potential impacts of a hog waste energy generation facility. She said the county received a proposal from a firm for a plant that would capture gas from the waste and turn it into usable energy.

"If the waste from the hogs was captured and processed (effectively) in a system like this, it could power 10,000 homes," she said.

Fryberger said she researched other communities around with waste-to-energy facilities and found that common question is about their odor. She reported that the central facilities can reduce odors at farms. And though the plants can also produce an odor, she said it can be controlled.

She looked into what is done with waste material from the plants. She said there would be some waste

that would go back to the hog farmers, who would use it as fertilizer. They would still need to maintain manure lagoons.

In addition to praising the work, Butterfield also warned the group about future federal funding for economic development. He said "new leadership" from a group of conservatives in the U.S. House don't believe in that kind of federal spending.

"There is a new critical mass of (politicians) in Washington who believe it's not the role of government," he said. "They do not believe in federally funded economic development."