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## County food hub could have \$3.3 million impact

Editor | June 28, 2013 | News | No comments

By Stephanie Johns

Staff Writer

A food hub based in Morgan County could have a \$3.3 million annual impact, according to Tommie Shepherd with the Center for Agribusiness & Economic Development at the University of Georgia.

During their June work session, the Morgan County Commission heard about a food hub from Shepherd, an agricultural economist.

He began by recognizing several contributors to the study: Bobby Smith, the county's former extension agent, Lucy Ray, the county's current extension agent, and Chris McCaulley, executive director of the Madison-Morgan Conservancy.

He noted that the food hub would help consumers who want to "Know Your Food, Know Your Farmer."

Based on the study, Shepherd said there is market potential.

As noted in the "Executive Summary," "For a plant that is able to consistently supply quality meat products at competitive prices, a substantial market exists within a 100 mile radius of Madison, including 3,000 supermarkets and 250 independent fine dining restaurants in an area encompassing Atlanta, Athens, Macon, and Augusta."

Shepherd said the study used conservative financing for the hub, which would cost about \$730,000 for land, a new building, and a walk-in cooler.

He said that there is a U.S. Department of Agriculture grant that offers money for co-op businesses. This grant was not included in the financing, he said.

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Also, there is a rural business opportunity grant or enterprise grant of up to \$300,000.

"That could go a long way toward changing the financial numbers," he said. "I didn't sugarcoat it because we didn't have firm numbers about grants."

Bob Hughes, president and economic development director of the Madison-Morgan Chamber of Commerce, agreed: "Leveraging financial opportunities out there strengthens the probability of it happening."

Shepherd said that with four to 10 employees on one shift, the plant could process about 600 head of livestock each year. With two shifts of employees they could process up to 1,200, Shepherd said.

A hybrid of two business models – one based on individual owners and the other based on plant ownership – might be best, he said.

He explained that under the hybrid model the plant could pursue a dedicated percentage of livestock from producers, develop its brand, and try to integrate organic producers, heirloom breeds, etc.

"This could be a vehicle for promoting local products," he said. "The more we're able to reach out and work with other groups, the more likely the food hub will come together."

He concluded his presentation by noting, "There are a lot of small pieces, we just need to do the work to pull them together."

## About Author



### Editor

The Morgan County Citizen is Madison and Morgan County, Ga.'s weekly newspaper, and sole source for accurate, hyperlocal information.

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