

Community receives newest food processor

By John Carpenter
Columbus Gazette

"What's next door to the Gazette, is it going to be a new restaurant?" is a question that we have been hearing in the office for a number of weeks now. So, to find an answer, we went next door and visited with our new neighbors, Elias Gutierrez and his mother, Leticia Parra. What we discovered is a new and growing food processing industry in town, Dona Letty Foods.

"Tamales are a five hour process to make," said Gutierrez, "and because of the time involved, they are usually only made for holidays and special events. Our business plan is to make tamales, along with other Mexican foods, for the wholesale trade." Currently Dona Letty Foods produces three separate tamale lines with plans to add an additional twenty-four products.

"Our present customer is Hy-Vee," said Gutierrez, "with our products now in the southeast Iowa Hy-Vee stores. Our business plan was to provide products to non-national brand grocers, and Hy-Vee fit our situation very well." Obviously this plan is working, as Gutierrez explained to me that they delivered a two-week supply of tamales to a Hy-Vee in Iowa City, and the products sold out in four days. An additional shift had to be added at Donna Letty Foods to produce more tamales for the store.

Gutierrez spends his days overseeing production, dealing with suppliers, and making deliveries to stores. Deliveries are made with a small van, but Gutierrez said that the company will soon be adding a refrigerated delivery truck. "We need the additional delivery capacity as the demand appears to be growing daily for our products, and with the refrigeration capability, we'll also be able to deliver products to stores further away," said Gutierrez.

It can be said that the business idea probably began in 1996 when Gutierrez and his family moved to the area from Texas. His parents came to work at IBP, and in her spare time Elias' mother, Leticia, would make Mexican specialties such as tamales and fajitas. Leticia would then share some of these with her co-workers, and requests followed asking her to make items for their family gatherings, and even cater their functions. The calls were coming nearly daily. "My mother is an excellent cook," said Gutierrez, "and many of her reci-



Leticia Parra shows off one of the products manufactured by Dona Letty Foods

pes have been passed down for three generations. We still use these same recipes in all of our products we now produce."

After graduating from college with a degree in business, Gutierrez began wondering if their could be wholesale market for these products. Gutierrez hired a research firm, and they explored the possibility. It was their conclusion that the business was possible. "Once we determined that the business idea was feasible, we then faced the problem of raising capital," explained Gutierrez. A business plan was developed, and Gutierrez approached a number of traditional lenders. "The concept was not what the bank was expecting," Gutierrez said, "and we just weren't very successful in our attempts. I could understand the reluctance because we really had no track record." Gutierrez then approached a few venture capitalists, and they were very willing to invest, however Gutierrez wasn't comfortable that he would have enough control over the business. But then a private investor came forward, and saw the potential in the business, and expressed an interest. With the funds that the family had, along with the investor's input, the business was launched.

Finding a location became the next challenge. "We visited all of the area communities, and spoke with the

city councils," said Gutierrez, "and we found that the Columbus Community was not only receptive to our locating there, but even made us feel welcomed, so the decision was easy." The family located in the building adjacent to the Gazette, the former Ostrem's dentist office and later Our Shop. Both the main floor and the basement were renovated for production. "The renovation was very important," said Gutierrez, "as we must not only pass preliminary state inspections, but we will also have representatives from the State of Iowa in nearly everyday inspecting our operation. Food production for wholesale is a very delicate process, and the USDA and State of Iowa monitors all businesses such as ours closely."

With the growth of their business, it soon became obvious that an additional location was necessary. "We needed a place to easily receive and warehouse our raw products, and be able to expand production when our product line increases," Gutierrez explained. He told of receiving one ton of flour in 50 # bags, and without a loading dock, the truck pulled up to the basement door and Gutierrez carried all of the bags in himself. So with this issue, the family began exploring buildings that might be workable. After looking at a number of options, they made an offer and pur-

chased the former bowling alley. "The city council was willing to work with us, so we purchased the building. Through the winter we will start working on this facility, as time allows, so it will also meet USDA standards," explained Gutierrez. He stated that the business will also continue to keep their Main Street location even after the bowling alley building is completed. Production will be maintained in both locations.

Besides Gutierrez and his mother, the business now employs four employees, and has two shifts. "We're approaching our growth very cautiously," said Gutierrez, "but my vision is to eventually have 250 employees and offer our twenty-seven products to many area grocers in our regional footprint in the midwest."

From making a few tamales for friends in her kitchen, Elias Gutierrez and Leticia Parra are now offering their tamales to Hy-Vee customers throughout southeast Iowa, and eventually throughout the state of Iowa. And the formation of this business is taking place on Main Street Columbus Junction. The story of Dona Letty Foods is truly an example of what imagination, the willingness to work hard, and an entrepreneurial spirit can accomplish. We wish our newest neighbors, Dona Letty Foods, the best of success in their new venture.

School experiences enrollment decrease for third time in four years

By Jim Rudisill

Initial numbers indicate the Columbus School District's 2010-11 student enrollment could be down 35 students, marking at least the third time in four years the school has recorded a drop in students. The bad news was presented to the school board during a special September 7 board meeting.

While the enrollment figures clearly showed a decrease compared with last years figures, a final certified enrollment is still a few weeks away, meaning the school could recover some of the lost ground.

According to Superintendent Rich Bridenstine and other officials, this year's drop will put the student count at 957.3. Student enrollment figures are generally fractional figures because state formulas allow some students to be counted under weighted categories.

Last year's enrollment was 992.9, which was actually a gain of 3.7 students over the 2008-09 school year, when there were 989.2 students enrolled in the district.

Although student enrollment is used in determining the amount of state aid available to a school district, any loss in students this year will not affect the district's financial picture until next year.

The school board also received a report from curriculum director Tara Paul on the district's 2009-10

ACT scores. The board opted last year to begin using the scores from the test students generally take in their junior year as assessments for student achievement.

According to the report, the students' scores ranged from 4.0 to 4.4 below the state averages for English, math, reading, science and composite.

The board also reviewed and discussed updates to several board programs and other topics, including:

- * the Powerful Choices program;
- * 4-block literacy;
- * School in Need of Assistance (SINA) supplementary services update;
- * "Wildcats First" group;
- * 90/90/90 schools opportunity;
- * Microsoft settlement;
- * superintendent evaluation; and
- * discussion on purposes and structure for additional monthly board meetings.

In final action, the board approved several personnel actions, including hiring Paul Corbiere and Sonya Stanerson as Beat for Peace sponsors; and Debbie Sulzberger as choreographer. Corbiere and Stanerson will receive \$1,408 for their positions, while Sulzberger's salary will be \$1,126. The board also accepted the resignation of Kari Pedersen Zuniga as junior high track coach and approved officials' contracts for this fall.

Council approves \$1.75 rate increase for recycling service

By Jim Rudisill

After agreeing earlier this summer to a new three-year contract that called for a rate increase with its recycling contractor, the city council agreed during its regular September 8th meeting to pass the cost on to city residents.

According to Mayor Dan Wilson, the new contract included a \$1.75 per residence increase in the monthly fee it pays to Hewitt Sanitation, Morning Sun. With the council action last week, that increase will boost the monthly fee for residents from \$17.25 to \$19.

The increase does not affect the

weekly collection service schedule. The portion of the fee for garbage collection also remains unchanged.

Wilson said the council needed to amend its sanitation ordinance to pass the increase on to local residents. The council waived the second and third readings of the amendment, meaning the new fees will go into effect with residents' October bill.

In other action, park board member Jim Gabriel met with the council to review proposed new rules and regulations for city park areas. Action on the proposals is expected at a later meeting.

Field Day at Red Fern Farm

Red Fern Farm will be hosting a field day on Saturday, September 18th to display chestnuts, Aronia berries, and native fruit trees. Beginning at 1:00 p.m. Tom Wahl, farmer and tree grower, will be talking about growing techniques and markets for a variety of fruit and nuts. A tour of paw-paws, hazels, persimmons and other species will be followed by a short walk to the nearby orchards.

Visitors will have an opportunity to see ripe chestnuts and try out some small scale chestnut harvesting equip-

ment. Tom Wahl will also speak on the marketing coop formed in Southeast Iowa.

Visitors are welcome to bring a picnic lunch or supper on the grounds before or after the talk. For more information about this free field day call Kathy Dice or Tom Wahl at 319-729-5905. Maps and directions are available at www.redfernfarm.com. This field day is being sponsored in part by Practical Farmers of Iowa and Iowa State University Extension - Louisa County.

Briefly -

FCCLA to host blood drive

Mark Your Calendars: The Columbus FCCLA will be hosting a blood drive on Wednesday, September 22, 2010 from 1:30 to 6:30 p.m. The FCCLA will be calling to schedule appointments this week. Please give and save lives. If you would like to sign up call Lois Mincks at CCHS 319-728-2231 ext. 3332.

Happenings at Colonial Estates

In honor of Assisted Living Week (which is September 13-18), Colonial Estate Assisted Living, 815 Colonial Lane, C.J., will have several events planned throughout the week. On Friday of that week, there will be a Cruise-In. Bring your classic car or hot rod to show. We will have music, maid-rites, coca-cola and cake from 5-8 p.m. Any questions, please call Sarah at 319-728-2276.

Cookies Plus Kids

An Informational Meeting for all Columbus Community High School Students (Parents are encouraged and welcome to attend) today, Wednesday, September 15 at 6:30 p.m., at the Columbus Senior Center. Questions, please call Mike and Renea Jay at 319-530-4010 during evening hours.

FCCLA selling yard decorations

The Columbus FCCLA is selling corn-shock yard decorations again this year for \$10 each. They are not self supporting, so need to be tied to a pole. Place your order by Thursday, September 23rd by calling Lois Mincks at CCHS 319-728-2231 ext. 3332 or email at lois.mincks@columbuscsd.org. They will be made and delivered Saturday, September 25, 2010.

Junctionopoly game available

The Junctionopoly game is still available at some downtown locations at a reduced price of \$10.00 (from \$25.00). Also, if you wish to order one and have it delivered, you can contact Stephanie Duncan at 319-728-2061, Joy Clark at 319-728-2654 or Cindy Johnston at 319-728-5032, or the United Presbyterian Church or United Methodist Churches in Columbus Junction. Proceeds from the purchase of this game go to the churches' youth groups.

Conservation Board to meet

The Louisa County Conservation Board will hold it's meeting on Tuesday, September 14, 2010, at 6:00 p.m., at Snively Campground.

Retired School Personnel to meet

The Louisa County Retired School Personnel will have their first fall meeting Tuesday, September 21st in Morning Sun. We will meet at the library at 10 a.m., tour a few locations, and have a lunch/meeting at the Dairy Bar at 11:30 a.m. Please bring your volunteer hours to this meeting. Remember, anything you do for someone else that you are not paid to do, is considered volunteering.

Library to host puppet show at school

Please mark you calendar - Sunday October 3rd at 2 p.m. at the Columbus Community School Auditorium. The Library is hosting the Eulenspiegel Puppet Theatre's production of The Flea. This is a melding of 2 Spanish-American folktales. The production will feature our very own students and live music provided by Ron Hillis. Admission: free! Please call the Library for details 319-728-7972 or email cathy.crawford@columbusjct.lib.ia.us.

Military women and wives luncheon

A Heart to Heart Brunch will be sponsored by Stonecroft Ministries honoring military wives and active duty women. The event will take place on Wednesday, October 6, 2010 from 9:30 - 11:30 A.M. at the Family Life Center, 4601 Utica Ridge Road, Davenport, Iowa. The dress code will be *casual attire*. There will be Giveaways and Special Gifts! Reservations are required for the brunch and free childcare. The deadline for both is: Friday, October 1, 2010. For more information, call Pam at 563-263-8443 or email: heid@maclink.com.

Meet and Greet for Miller-Meeks

The Louisa County Co-chairs for Mariannette Miller-Meeks for Congress, will be hosting a meet and greet in Wapello on Monday, September 20th, at the Wapello Ambulance Barn at 400 Highway 61 from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. There will be ample opportunity for questions and answers and the public is encouraged to attend! Get out and meet your candidate for Congress for District 2!

PEO to meet

The next meeting of PEO Chapter CX will be held at the home of Judy Sievers on Monday, September 20th at 7:00 p.m. and co-hosted by Jacqueline Johnson Onesto. The program will be "Sister's Potluck - 50's & 60's." All members are encouraged to attend.

Riverboat Foundation to meet

The Washington County Riverboat Foundation will meet in the Wellman Room at the Riverside Casino and Golf Resort today, Wednesday, September 15, 2010 at 6:00 p.m. This is a public meeting.

Washington Conservation hours

Starting October 1, 2010 the Washington County Conservation Education Center at Marr Park will be changing to its winter hours. We hope you will continue to come out and enjoy the center throughout the winter months. Winter Hours (October 1st - March 31st): Monday 8:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.; Tuesday Closed; Wednesday Closed; Thursday 8:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.; Friday 8:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.; Saturday 8:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.; Sunday 1:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.

Community Club to meet

The Columbus Community Club will meet this Thursday at Noon at the Senior Center.

Washington Model Railroad Club news

The Washington Model Railroad Club will hold its annual Train Show and Swap Meet on Sunday, October 3rd from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., at the Knights of Columbus Hall, 606 W 3rd Street, Washington, IA 52353. All scales will be represented. Admission is \$4 for adults, \$1 for children ages 6-12, early arrivals \$5. Swap tables to rent are \$18 each. There will be a food stand in the building. For more information, contact Mike Worley at 319-653-3782.