

## Open Letter -- Virginia Tech Dairy Center Relocation

R. Michael Akers  
Horace E. and Elizabeth F. Alphin Professor  
& Department Head



Dear Stakeholders, Friends and Concerned Citizens:

As we now move past the election cycle and the coming efforts to meet what is sure to be difficult budget and operational demands for the university and other state agencies, I wanted to lay out the facts as I know them related to the relocation of the Virginia Tech Dairy Center. Dean Alan Grant and others are also working to provide more information and opportunities for input to this process as well. First, I want each of you to clearly understand that relocation of the Dairy Center is not something that was promoted by the Department of Dairy Science. However, as outlined below, it has become our duty and responsibility to figure out how best to respond to these events and provide input to the architectural and engineering firms involved so that replacement facilities can be constructed that will support continuing success of departmental teaching, research, and Extension programming and provide benefits to the citizens of Virginia and especially the Virginia Dairy Industry.

Here is the time-line of events as I understand them. In late 2008 and early 2009 the work of an agricultural land use committee and hired consultants, initiated by former Dean Sharron Quisenberry and university planners was presented to President Steger. This group was charged essentially with creating an addendum on the future of use of Virginia Tech agricultural lands to be added to the University Master Plan.

Among the issues studied:

- What are future plans for development of central campus?
- What is the future of the Corporate Research Center (CRC)?
- What are town and county plans with respect to roads, interchanges, schools, and other development?
- What is the capacity of university land west of the 460 bypass to support agricultural enterprises, allow for anticipated development, and at the same time meet state and federal mandates related to nutrient management and production of needed forage crops?

- What arrangement would allow for continuing expansion to support research centers, the growth of the economic engine that is CRC, anticipated growth of the Virginia Tech Montgomery Executive Airport, future educational or additional research initiatives from central administration and at the same time allow for the continued success of the college's scholarship/research, teaching, and Extension functions.

As was stated at the time, this planning process sought to encompass all of CALS 'near' campus agricultural activities – animal and plant – so that future disruptions would be minimal. In short, there was the desire to develop a comprehensive plan for agricultural lands that will take us well into the future and preserve the integrity of our programs.

As this process unfolded, the college, departments, and individuals supplied detailed information to the consultants regarding things like: (1) number of students involved and classes held at different locations, (2) structures involved, (3) visitors and tours, (4) research and educational projects taking place, (5) land used for crops, grazing, waste and nutrient management and so forth. While this plan impacts all college farming operations, Dairy Science is the first forced to respond specifically because of the expansion of the Corporate Research Center along Tech Center Drive and the expansion of the Virginia Tech Montgomery Executive Airport runway.

In the initial planning related to the Dairy Center, it was expected that the Dairy Center would simply move to the west side of the 460 bypass. However, as the consultants analyzed all of the information, it became evident that, with all of the pieces in place, that this was not workable in a manner that would provide the number of cows and the feeding, milking, research, and maintenance facilities necessary to support all department functions as well as provide opportunities for Veterinary Medicine and the Agricultural Technology (Two Year) Program.

The expansion of the CRC into its Phase II is already underway. This move has taken 90 acres of Dairy Center land and the last crops were recently harvested. Surveying for utilities and road ways is scheduled to begin in the next couple of months. This land is now lost for agricultural use.

While we can argue philosophically about the relevance or value of expansion of the airport, it is evident to me that at least in the long-term that a positive decision for expansion has been made. Specific to the airport in part as a result of safety issues posed by the FAA, at each end of the runway federal law mandates a pyramidal zone with few if any structures. Secondly, these areas would never have more than a minimal number of people present and should be areas that do not attract birds. As the airport expansion was discussed, there were two scenarios proposed. A shorter expansion would have brought the safety zone to within approximately 20' of the corner of the existing freestall barn. Within this option it would be possible to leave the lactating cows in place but this option would have required the replacement of some of the facilities that are now within the safety zone e.g. transition cow housing and handling, calving area, feed storage modifications, and area for intensive research with lactating cows (metabolism barn).

As discussions and fact gathering continued, it became evident that the most desirable university and airport authority scenario was one that extended the runway the greater distance the so-called 5,500' option. In this case the safety area extends virtually all the way to the current Southgate Drive beyond the Etgen pavilion. Logically, if this longer airport runway extension scenario is destined to happen even some years away, it would be a poor decision to build a transition cow barn and metabolism research facility knowing that these are only 'temporary' structures. Would it not be a better solution to complete a relocation that would meet dairy science programmatic needs once and for all rather than a piece meal approach?

As the work of the committee continued, it was concluded that the relocation of nearly all of the Dairy Center facilities to the Kentland Farm in Montgomery County was the most reasonable alternative. The exception to this is the fact that the current plan has a group of non-lactating cows remaining in the area west of the 460 bypass. It is likely that a number teaching and student activities will ultimately be accomplished by bringing animals temporarily to this 'teaching' facility located west of the 460 bypass. This version of the plans became known as the preferred option (by the consultants and the land use committee).

In late spring (2009), the consultant firm and members of university planning presented this preferred option to President Steger and Provost McNamee. They ultimately agreed, and the plan was subsequently presented to the Board of Visitors. At that time \$500,000 was approved to initiate planning for the all of the relocation. Subsequently, during July and August after funds were actually encumbered the university's Planning, Design and Construction Department solicited proposals from architectural and engineering firms to bid for the project to complete the planning for what is now called Phase I and II of the Dairy Center Relocation. After interviewing six firms, three were selected for onsite interviews, and ultimately a firm was hired. Work to create a detailed topographical survey of the Kentland Farm is currently underway, and discussions to create a detailed plan are currently in progress.

From our departmental perspective, this involves providing details and attributes of structures and facilities as well as considerations of interactions with other animal sciences operations at the Kentland location. One of the most important aspects has been our repeated emphasis with the committee, now the architectural and engineering firm, the design and construction department and the college administration that this relocation will have tremendous impacts on teaching and student activities. And perhaps most critical that solving these issues will require additional continuing resources, well beyond simply getting structures and facilities planned and constructed. These are points that I along with others in the department will continue to bring back to the front of the table. I take some comfort in knowing that our new Dean, Dr. Alan Grant, comes from an animal science department and that he has firsthand knowledge and experience understanding the cost and logistic issues of managing classes and student activities at farm facilities located a considerable distance from main campus.

I would also like to take a moment to suggest that we all take some time to consider what I think are some of the bigger picture items in this entire process.

- My priority is to do all that I can to ensure that we have facilities that we need as a department to have research, teaching, and Extension programs that are as successful and high quality as possible and that we are respected partners with our college and university. I am frankly, pleased that discussions for relocation and recreation of facilities are serious and moving forward.
- Clearly, it has been a tremendous advantage to have the Dairy Center so close to main campus for these many years, but, with appropriate resources, planning, and support, I believe we can continue to be productive with other arrangements if we choose success. Challenges, yes, but isn't that life?
- I believe we have to be realistic and willing to look more globally across the university at our position relative to other programs and activities.
- Let me give a specific example. The CRC has been a huge success and economic engine for this community and the university. The logic of having the expansion close to the present location and close to the airport is self evident. I should also add that there are already plans (albeit distant) for a CRC phase III located in the area west of the 460 bypass. This area also is linked to planning for a new interchange and future cross-county connector road. These only add to the issues with near campus land uses.
- Whether appreciated or not, Virginia citizens speak with their votes and ultimately the legislators that they send to Richmond. Virginia Tech, like many other Virginia universities has rapidly become not so much a state-supported but rather a state-related university. What this means in a practical sense is that the impetus for seeking non-state revenue to run the university enterprise has never been more urgent. This explains the focus on creation of research centers, the Virginia Tech Carillion School of Medicine and Research Institute, and even our departmental push for grants and contracts. It's worth a reminder that the National Science Foundation has ranked our college 5th nationally in agricultural and natural resources research expenditures. This says to me that the college is working to be a part of the solution as well. Irrespective of your political leanings, recent events, combined with our current budget morass, suggests to me that there will be even more pressure to be business-like, lean and mean, cut the waste, etc. So my point is, if the Dairy Science Center relocation is viewed as an aid in promotion of business, entrepreneurial activity, jobs creation, and more support for the university in some manner, we best figure out how to be a partner and make it work for our purposes as well.
- We are all rightly proud of the successes of our department. I hope that you all have taken the time to read our fall 2009 Department Newsletter. But we also need to have some perspective about the department and our program from a broader university perspective. Our ongoing research portfolio is very strong. Approximately \$7.5M is the multi-year value of projects by Dairy Science professors and colleagues. We have about 100 undergraduates with multiple examples of national award winning student activities. Our departmental

scholarship and research efforts are also very good. But for some perspective our 100 undergraduates and 20 graduate students represent only a fraction of the approximately 23,000 VT undergraduates and 5,000 graduate students. We are rightly proud of our agricultural roots and the strengths that we bring to this proud land-grant university but we must also be successful within the context of the broader university setting.

My opinion is that the decision for Dairy Center relocation is a done deal. However, given the economic situation, I also believe the rush to move will not be quite as urgent as was it was only a few months ago. A first phase will be the movement of non-lactating animals temporarily across the 460 bypass until facilities at Kentland are ready. The movement of the lactating herd to Kentland will likely take longer than presented in the initial consultant's report, but this I believe will nonetheless be the outcome. It would seem foolish to have hired and pay for the architecture and engineering firm to develop the detailed construction plans for the Kentland site if this were not the case. I remind you that relocation information will routinely be updated on the college homepage ([www.cals.vt.edu/about/reloc\\_dairygen.html](http://www.cals.vt.edu/about/reloc_dairygen.html)).

So what does this mean to us and to you? Here are our choices as I see them: (1) we can play Don Quixote and with attempts to stop what I see as the inevitable, or (2) we can think seriously about functions, facilities, and properties of a new Dairy Center. If like me your choice is number two, we would appreciate hearing from you. I anticipate that many of the faculty and staff are having and have expressed similar needs and expectations for relocated facilities, but that would only reinforce their importance. As always e-mails, regular mail, phone calls, or visits are welcome.

I understand that for many you these events have been troubling, but for those of you who know me well, I try very hard to be optimistic. With your input we have an opportunity at the end of this process to have a Dairy Center that will really provide tools for excellence in each of our primary missions. Let's work together to make it a reality.

Sincerely yours,

R. Michael Akers, Ph.D.