November 4, 2009

Subject: Open Letter to Virginia Tech Dairy Science Students, Alumni and Friends

Topic: Dairy Center Relocation

From: R. Michael Akers, Ph.D., Horace E. and Elizabeth F. Alphin Professor and Department Head

Dear Students, Alumni, and Friends:

As we now move past the election cycle and the coming efforts to meet what is sure to be difficult budget and operational demands, I wanted to attempt to lay out the facts as I know them related to the relocation of the Virginia Tech Dairy Center. I understand that Dean Grant and others are 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 is not something that was promoted by the department. However, it has become our duty to figure out how best to respond and provide input to the architectural and engineering firms so that replacement facilities can be constructed that will support continuing success of departmental teaching, research, and Extension programming.

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 had the aim of encompassing 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 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 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 harvested from this area only a few weeks ago. 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 raised by the FAA, at each end of the runway federal law mandates a pyramidal area 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 would have required the replacement of some of the facilities that are within the safety zone e.g. transition cow and 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 scenario was one that extended the runway the greatest 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 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. This version of the plans 
became known as the preferred option (by the consultants and the land use committee).

In late spring, 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 scheduled to begin in a matter of days.

From our departmental perspective, this involves providing details and attributes of structures 
and facilities as well as considerations of interactions with other animal and poultry 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, the dean and college administration on the fact that this relocation 
will have tremendous impacts on teaching and student activities. And perhaps most critical is 
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
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,
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 really 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 the
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, our recent election results, combined with our current
budget morass, suggest 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. I suspect many legislators
would see a loss of the Virginia Tech Dairy Center as nothing more than a tough
business decision.

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 is good. But for some perspective our 100 undergraduates represent only a fraction of the approximately 22,000 to VT undergraduates. As for funding VBI, just one of the research centers, just announced a single grant for $27 million. There examples are not meant to belittle our success but to put our metrics in a broader perspective to the entire university enterprise.

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 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).

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. 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,

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