



NEWS FROM **ULSTER COUNTY** County Executive Jen Metzger

******For Immediate Release******

Date: Thursday, October 29, 2026

Contact: Amberly Jane Campbell, Assistant Deputy County Executive
(845) 340-3800 x8958 / acam@ulstercountyny.gov

Ulster County Holds First Economic Futures Mini-Summit with Focus on Value-Added Agriculture & Food Production

KINGSTON, NY - On Tuesday, Ulster County convened more than 100 food producers, farmers, educators, nonprofit leaders, students, workforce professionals, lenders, manufacturers, and economic development partners for the first-ever Economic Futures Mini-Summit on Value-Added Agriculture & Food Production. Held at Ulster BOCES Career Academies at iPark 87, the mini-summit is the first in a series of five sector-specific summits initiated by County Executive Metzger to inform Ulster County's Economic Development Strategic Framework and deepen partnerships among industry, educational, and community partners. The series will culminate in a multi-sector Economic Futures Summit in Spring 2027. The next Mini-Summit, on Film and Media, will be held at SUNY New Paltz on December 10.

Tuesday's gathering explored the intersection of agriculture, food production, advanced manufacturing, innovation, workforce development, and education. The featured panel, "Growing It Here, Making It Here," was moderated by Kyle Jaster of Community Food Works, and included Stephanie Bauman of BjornQorn, Rick Osofsky of Ronnybrook Farm Dairy, Nels Leader of Bread Alone, and Katherine DeWitt, the Ulster County Agricultural Services Administrator.

A clear theme emerged from the panel discussion and presentations that followed: Economic development is most effective when businesses, educators, government agencies, workforce partners, and community organizations work together as a connected ecosystem rather than in isolation.

"These mini-summits are designed to move beyond traditional economic development conversations by focusing on key sectors of our economy," **said Ulster County Executive Jen**

Metzger. "We're bringing together business, educational, government, and community partners to learn from one another, explore new opportunities, and build partnerships that further strengthen and diversify the local economy. It makes sense to start with food and agriculture, which has long been foundational to our economy, and we're seeing incredible innovation and entrepreneurship in this sector that we want to support and build on."

The Economic Futures Summit initiative was first announced during County Executive Metzger's State of the County address in February 2026. Since March, a steering committee led by the Department of Economic Development and community stakeholders has been working to design a process focused on lasting impact, actionable recommendations, and meaningful collaboration beyond a single event.

A defining feature of the mini-summit was its emphasis on education as an economic development strategy.

The event was co-emceed by Leslie Wellington, Director of Economic Development, and Sharon Williams, Director of the Ulster County Office of Employment and Training, who framed the gathering around the idea that schools and educational institutions are not simply workforce pipelines, but essential partners in driving innovation, entrepreneurship, and long-term economic vitality.

Students participated throughout the day, helping document the event through photography and videography, giving demonstrations of solutions they developed for the factory floor, contributing ideas and observations, and preparing the meals served to attendees. The culinary students showcased their talents through a menu that included salad greens grown on site in hydroponic grow-towers created by the students, as well as bread from Bread Alone, BjornQorn popcorn, and milk and yogurt supplied by Ronnybrook Dairy. The summit also featured tours of the Ulster BOCES Career Academies, where participants observed student-centered instruction in agriculture, culinary arts, and advanced manufacturing programs.

"When we center students and intentionally connect P-12 education, higher education, county government, and our community and business partners, everyone benefits," **said Dr. Jonah Schenker, Ulster BOCES District Superintendent and CEO.** "This is about more than workforce development; it is about taking a systems approach to building a stronger, more connected regional economy. By breaking down silos and creating meaningful pathways between learning, innovation, and industry, we can ensure that our young people are not simply preparing to participate in the future of Ulster County, but are actively helping to

shape it. That is how workforce development becomes community revitalization and economic mobility.”

The featured panel discussion, "**Growing It Here, Making It Here,**" explored the opportunities and challenges facing Ulster County's food and agriculture economy. Panelists highlighted the importance of relationships and locally-rooted partnerships, sharing examples of how collaborations between farms and food businesses have helped strengthen regional supply chains. The conversation also examined how businesses can scale while maintaining quality, independence, and community values, with panelists discussing approaches ranging from self-funded growth and streamlined product lines to multi-generational family ownership. Workforce development emerged as a key theme, with participants emphasizing the growing need for technical skills, problem-solving abilities, and stronger connections between industry and educational partners as food manufacturing becomes increasingly sophisticated and technology-driven.

"The Economic Futures Summit showcased Ulster BOCES' extraordinary training center, along with the vision of County Executive Metzger and her team," **said Nels Leader, CEO of Bread Alone Bakery.** "Ulster County is clearly committed to building an ecosystem where businesses like Bread Alone, BjornQorn, and Ronnybrook can thrive. It's exciting and energizing, and we're honored to be part of it."

Demonstration Project: Advanced Manufacturing Meets the Mill was one of the afternoon's most compelling presentations, showcasing a collaboration between Community Food Works and Ulster BOCES advanced manufacturing students. Students were challenged to identify real-world production challenges at Community Food Works' flour mill in Hurley and develop practical solutions that could improve efficiency and operations.

Students Blake Powers, Brett Bradford, and Frank Coddington Jr. documented facility processes, collected measurements, developed prototypes, and created manufacturing solutions using CAD modeling, 3D printing, and hands-on design principles. The results were dramatic. One student-designed improvement reduced a repetitive flour handling task from approximately 75 seconds to less than 15 seconds, saving more than a minute every time a pallet was processed. Another prototype involved a food-safe magnetic holder designed to improve efficiency on the production floor. Notably, these student-created solutions moved from concept to implementation within weeks.

"This was a valuable experience because it was my first major project and I gained real world experience through the challenges Community Foodworks had in the Mill," **said Blake**

Powers, New Paltz High School junior and first year Robotics and Advanced Manufacturing student. “I learned the best ways to approach an industry problem.”

“I really enjoyed working with Community Foodworks as an industry partner,” **said Brett Bradford, Saugerties High School senior and second year Robotics and Advanced Manufacturing student.** “It was so helpful to my learning process to have direct access to Kyle and his team.”

County and education leaders described the demonstration as a powerful example of how small, practical improvements can deliver significant operational benefits while expanding the role of educational partnerships beyond workforce placement to include innovation, product development, problem-solving, and curriculum design.

"What we're hearing is that this sector needs both innovation pathways and collaboration pathways," **said Leslie Wellington, Director of Economic Development.** "We want to proactively invest in the partnerships, infrastructure, and spaces this industry needs to accelerate growth and support the development of a food innovation hub here in Ulster County, with small and large companies alike.”

The mini-summit also highlighted the extensive work already underway to strengthen Ulster County's food and agriculture economy through strategic investments, partnerships, and business support initiatives. These include:

- The first-ever Farm Viability & Sustainability Grant Program, which supported business growth, energy efficiency, and climate resilience, administered in partnership with Hudson Valley AgriBusiness Development Corporation (HVADC).
- The upcoming launch of the Agricultural Sustainability Revolving Loan Fund, also in partnership with HVADC.
- Ongoing collaboration with Cornell Cooperative Extension of Ulster County on farmer education, technical assistance, and value-added production training.
- Partnerships with the Rondout Valley Growers Association to provide micro-grants to farmers, and additional programs to advance farm viability, agricultural growth and pathways to diversification.
- Work with SUNY Ulster to expand workforce development opportunities through programs such as CNC machining training, stackable micro-credentials, and Small Business Development Center services that support both employers and entrepreneurs.

- The Ulster County Soil and Water Conservation District's equipment-sharing program continues to provide farmers access to specialized conservation and production equipment.
- The County's Department of Economic Development is also actively connecting businesses with financing opportunities, workforce resources, educational partners, and technical assistance while developing additional loan and grant programs to help agricultural enterprises, food processors, and emerging businesses grow, innovate, and remain competitive.

“The strong turnout and enthusiastic response to this event reinforced the importance of bringing industry and education together,” **said Sharon Williams, Director of the Ulster County Office of Employment and Training.** “By highlighting the connections between farming, food processing, and education, we were able to showcase meaningful pathways that strengthen our local economy, and support the future growth of these vital industries. The conversations and connections made throughout the event reflect the power of collaboration and the exciting opportunities ahead.”

The next Economic Futures Mini-Summit will focus on the film and media sector and will be held on Thursday, December 10, at SUNY New Paltz. (Snow date is Monday, December 14.)

For more information, and to subscribe to the Ulster County Department of Economic Development newsletter, visit <https://ulstercountyny.gov/economic-development>.

###



[Ulstercountyny.gov](https://ulstercountyny.gov)