

WNY keeps its cheese

Cattaraugus County uses tax breaks to land factory promising 430 jobs

Great news for Western New York: Great Lakes Cheese plans to build a \$500 million cheese factory in the Cattaraugus County town of Franklinville.

It isn't every day – it isn't most days – that a company says it will invest a half billion dollars in rural Western New York. The family that owns the company deserves a lot of credit for keeping the company here. They could have gone elsewhere.

For two years, Great Lakes Cheese has been searching for a replacement for its existing facility in Cuba in Allegany County. The company initially set sights on farmland in Allegany County, where the industrial development agency had approved a package of tax incentives worth \$200 million over 20 years. That prospect became controversial when the owners of the property didn't want to sell – they felt that Great Lakes Cheese had not offered enough – and a local development agency proposed taking the land through eminent domain.

Enter Cattaraugus County. Great Lakes Cheese was granted tax breaks that could be worth as much as \$166 million by the Cattaraugus County Industrial Development Agency. The IDA promised the company a 25-year property tax break, including no property tax payments on the new plant for 20 years.

That's a big price tag, but the company will employ 430 workers and, just as important, will expand the capacity of the company and increase the demand for milk produced by Western New York dairy farmers.

Construction on the new factory, a 480,000-square-foot facility on about 130 acres along Route 16 in Franklinville, is expected to begin in spring 2022 and be completed by early 2025. Ninety-five percent of the Cuba facility's 229 workers are likely to work at the new Franklinville plant, according to Corey Wiktor, the IDA's executive director. The new facility, says Kurt Epprecht, whose family owns the company, will be "one of the country's premier cheese manufacturing and packaging facilities."

This story could have easily gone the other way – another company and hundreds of jobs leaving for another state. Instead, it is a Western New York success story.