Ellsworth Cooperative Creamery has been seeking out funding in the form of federal and state grants. We’re thrilled to announce that we have been the recipient of several grants this year—over $1.4 million in total—which will help in expanding market share, as well as our expansion project in Menomonie, WI.

In addition to negotiating a lucrative land purchase in the Menomonie Industrial Park, we have been awarded Tax Increment Financing (TIF) credits from the City of Menomonie, a cash grant for completion of our building, and a small continuation grant as we complete each growth phase of the Menominee facility.

At the state-level, we have been awarded a Wisconsin Economic Development Tax Credit of $750,000 for workforce expansion and retention in Ellsworth’s Menomonie location. We have had success with this grant program in the past.

Ellsworth Cooperative Creamery received a Federal USDA Grant to assist in our Halal certification. Halal is an Islamic term that means lawful or permitted. Halal certification is a process which ensures the features and quality of our product meets the rules established by the Islamic Council that allow the use of the mark Halal.

The procedure for obtaining this certification can be extensive and costly, including audits, testing, and sampling. However, this certification will open new markets for our products, particularly our processed cheeses, cheese curds, and specialty cheeses from the Comstock and Menomonie plants.

In addition, we have been awarded a Specialty Cheese Grant to market one of our newest products, freeze-dried cheese curds. What makes this product especially exciting is that it is an ideal product for export. The freeze-dried process allows us to expand our sales beyond that which would typically be feasible due to the need for refrigeration.

Combined, these grants and tax credits become significant as we look at the overall cost of the Menomonie plant project and new product releases, and how to best manage costs for our patron owners.

Including the land in Menomonie, they represent over $2.5 million in total value for our cooperative, making projects possible.

Grant opportunities like these, while always available, can be challenging to secure. Our success this year is based on years of relationship building and networking. Being a good corporate citizen on a state and national level helps to establish credibility and trust, making Ellsworth Cooperative Creamery an ideal candidate for these types of grant opportunities.

As with many business strategies, being in the right place at the right time, strategically, is key. There is also a certain amount of knowledge required to assess grant opportunities to ensure they are the right fit for any given project, and complete extensive grant applications and other necessary paperwork.
Adapting in Times of COVID-19
(Or How NOT to Get Cranky During a Pandemic)

By Paul Bauer, CEO, Manager | paulb@ellsworthcreamery.net

We’ve been navigating some stressful days around here. I know we’re not alone. The stress caused by these continuously changing and uncertain times are making news headlines. Even worse, there’s no end in sight. From our milk haulers to our retail store customers to our staff, we have seen first-hand how the added complexities of doing business, particularly in a pandemic, are impacting individuals. However, despite it all, the business of making and selling cheese must go on. Here are just a few of the many ways that our operations have been challenged and forced to adapt:

Managing Staff Levels: Not only are we concerned for the health and safety of our team members, we are concerned for their family members, too. An illness in the family is always a staffing challenge; however, what in the past may have been a few days missed from work now equates to 10... 14... or more! Our employees have stepped up and despite the inconvenience of rearranging their personal lives, have been flexible to help cover shifts and take on extra responsibilities. In a way, it’s been humbling and reassuring to know that when the going gets tough, our staff and milk haulers can quickly adopt a “whatever it takes” attitude to get the job done.

Managing Changing Order Patterns: A change in buying patterns by consumers, and disruptions in the supply chain, has drastically changed the way our buyers are purchasing product in both frequency and quantity. At the same time, the customers still have very specific demands. These changes have required us to handle that demand and their requirements faster than ever before.

We’ve Gone Virtual: You’ve probably attended an online meeting or two since the pandemic first began. Our team has taken virtual meetings to an entirely new level. Not just for meetings any more—we are using technology for virtual inspections and audits, too. Taking meetings, inspections, and audits virtual has meant investments in technological equipment and upgrades. We’ve had to purchase new cameras and upgrade Internet and broadband technology to meet the demand for increased speed and data.

New Products: Developing and launching new products during this time has been particularly interesting. The lesson learned here is that we can’t count on doing things the way we used to. When it comes to labeling, ordering new film, or purchasing shipping supplies, we have had to adjust our expectations to the realities of the marketplace and our suppliers. This has meant adjusting timelines, collaborating with our partners virtually, and getting creative with our suppliers to find new ways to meet our goals to roll new products out to the marketplace.

Adapting in Times of Covid (cont.)

Adapting in our Retail Stores: The changes we’ve been required to make during this time are most visible to the public in our retail stores. Requiring staff to wear masks and asking our customers to do the same, impacts the customer service experience more than you may realize. Limiting the number of customers allowed in the retail stores at one time is against every customer service and marketing lesson we’ve known. Yet, our staff continues to provide great value and the best experience possible, as is evident by the increase in store traffic and sales.

Store volume has increased by 15-20% since the start of the pandemic. We’re seeing customers stay longer in the stores and purchase more items at one time, even while we’re limiting headcounts in our stores. Our staff should be commended for maintaining their smiles (behind their masks) as they’ve been on the frontlines of it all. Despite the challenges, the changes, and the inevitable cranky times, there have been bright spots, too. Virtual meetings have led to a new level of efficiency. We’ve saved on travel expenses, and learned to connect with our customers and suppliers in new ways. Our team has discovered a new adeptness to meeting end-customer demands and overcoming production and supply-chain issues. Through it all we’ve built up some new muscles—adaptation, flexibility, and perseverance. What we never thought possible just a few months ago, we’re making happen today! And when COVID-19 is behind us, we’ll be ready to take what we’ve learned—all the good ideas and creativity—into the future.

Celebrating National Cheese Curd Day!

It’s a holiday that’s so uniquely us—and when you live in the Cheese Curd Capital of Wisconsin, this is how you celebrate! In addition to celebrations in our retail stores and on social media channels, we brought smiles to the faces of hundreds of school kids in the Ellsworth, WI Community School District when we delivered cheese curds to them for National Cheese Curd Day. Some say the “squawks” could be heard for miles!