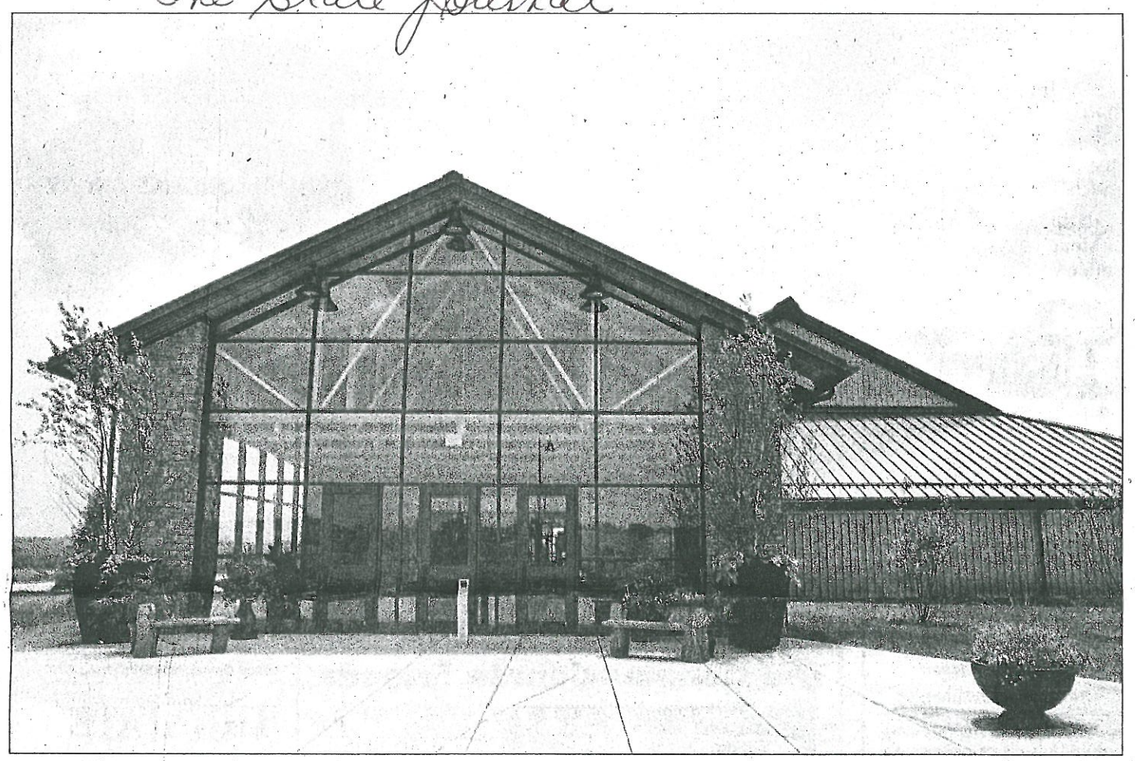
The State Journal



STATE JOURNAL/HILLY SCHIFFER

Kentucky State University's new 12,000-square-foot building at the Research and Demonstration Farm is named the Center for Sustainability of Farms and Families. The facility will host agriculture education workshops, large-scale events and farm shows.

KSU farm center 'long time coming'

$5M facility opens for classes, events

BY KATHERAN WASSON
STATE JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

With movable walls and glass doors that open wide to bring the outside in, Kentucky State University's new $5.2 million agriculture center is all about versatility.

"You can have a horse show here in the morning, and a black tie event in the afternoon, if you wanted to," says Dr. Harold Benson, director of the university's Land Grant Program, gesturing as he walks through the conference rooms on a recent afternoon.

The Center for Sustainable Farms and Families will

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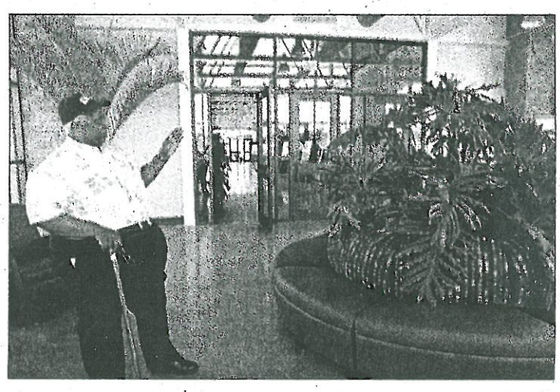
| MORE INSIDE

• For more on next Thursday's field day at the new center, see Agriculture News on C4.



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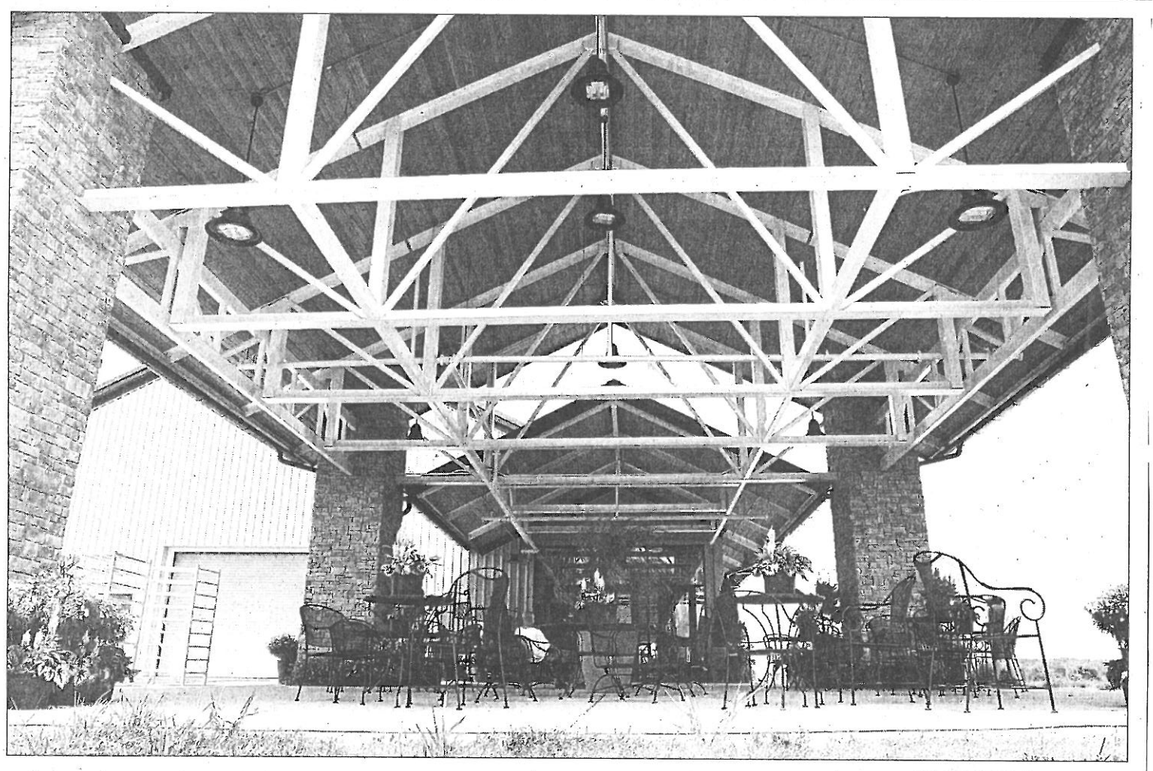
Dr. Harold Benson, director of the Land Grant Program at Kentucky State University, stands in the entryway of the new center.



STATE JOURNAL/HILLY SCHIFFER

The patio of Kentucky State University's new Center for Sustainability of Farms and Families has several chairs and tables set up that will be available for large-scale events.

CENTER | USDA paid for the construction

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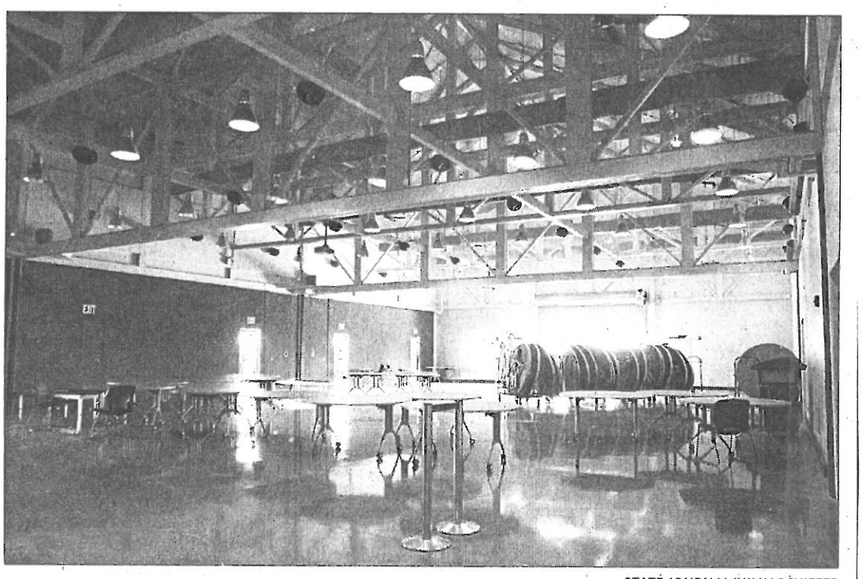
host farm shows, agriculture education workshops and conventions, training sessions and the university's monthly Third Thursday Thing events.

The 12,000-square-foot building sits on the KSU Research and Demonstration Farm, off Mills Lane near Anderson County.

The center was paid for with facility grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Benson said. It's been in the works for four to five years, he said, and was at times deemed "out of scope" because of the cost.

University regents broke ground for the building in April 2009, and officials celebrated its grand opening June 16.

"It's almost like saving money up in your cookie jar," Benson said. "It's been a long time coming."



STATE JOURNAL/HILLY SCHIFFER

Inside Kentucky State University's new Center for Sustainability of Farms and Families at the KSU Research and Demonstration Farm is one large room that can be divided into three separate rooms.

KSU had outgrown its 2,000-square-foot farm building, Benson said – squeezing even 80 people inside was a stretch. Next Thursday the center will host 800 from around the U.S. for its annual field day.

"We want to be an advocate for the continuation of farms as we know it today, coupling that with some technological changes," he said.

"Families have, for generations, bred their children on farms."

The new building can accommodate 750 seated banquet style or more seated theater style. The walls can be moved to create three small meeting rooms, or one large space for events.

Video screens in the lobby will announce meetings and events, and conference rooms contain big screens and a stereo system – the movie "Top Gun" was used to test speakers a few weeks ago, Benson said.

A back door allows trucks to park and unload farm animals for demonstrations.

The patio can also be enclosed with a tent and the glass doors rolled back, creating one giant space.

"It gives you the versatility of having an indoor, and at the same time an outdoor atmosphere," Benson said.

"You can do something really, really exciting and entertaining, not like any other facility in Franklin County."

Hosting educational programs will be the building's primary purpose, Benson said. But it will also be available to community groups and state agencies for a fee.

The rolling countryside and vineyards that surround it also suggest the perfect spot for a wedding – and the full service kitchen doesn't hurt either.

Benson said the university "will not encourage" private social events like weddings, birthday parties and baby showers, but KSU could rent out the facility for those purposes at a higher cost.

Money from renting the space will go back into agriculture at KSU. Benson said the income will augment some of the department's needs, but it won't be enough to build new programs.

"We don't want to make up for the loss in state revenue on the backs of state agencies (that rent space)," he said.

"But it will certainly help ... it's going to take a lot to keep it nice and clean and presentable."

At the grand opening, Mac Stone, the first manager of KSU's farm, presented a $15,000 check from the USDA to fund Third Thursday Thing programs.

KSU purchased the research farm in January 1986. Benson said university leaders decided early on to carve their own niche, instead of trying to compete with the University of Kentucky – the state's flagship land grant institution.

They focused on helping local farmers – who often had limited resources and small tracts – sustain their businesses and reduce the use of herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers.

Organic farming is a growing phenomenon now, he said, but it wasn't popular in the '80s when the program started. Portions of the farm are currently being converted to a certified organic operation.

"If we can continue to foster that kind of effort, therein lays Kentucky State University's place in this whole notion of sustainability of farms and families," he said.

"We don't need to lose any more farms. We don't need to lose any more families."

The new facility isn't "a magic wand," Benson says, but the programs it hosts will build an infrastructure for change by teaching people farming techniques through hands-on experience.

"Words are hard to find to express my enthusiasm for it, and the opportunity it gives our staff to do great things with great results," Benson said.