

## Central Grocers Inc. headquarters opens

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JOLIET -- Area officials had several reasons to celebrate at Sunday's grand opening of the \$90 million Central Grocers Inc. building in the Cherry Hill Business Park.



Jim Denges, CEO of Central Grocers, addresses the crowd Sunday before the ribbon cutting ceremony during the grand opening of its headquarters building in Joliet. (Ryan Thompson/For The Herald News)



Not only did the 92-year-old company relocate its warehouse to Will County, it also brought along its corporate headquarters, which is something economic development officials here would like to see more of. Also, the building is green, powering all of its 225 pieces of equipment with hydrogen fuel cells instead of traditional batteries.

Central, a co-op that distributes food to its independent grocery store owners, had been located in Franklin Park for 52 years. But the company wanted to be closer to clients and the Interstate 80/355 intersection was the perfect spot, said Central CEO Jim Denges.

"We wanted to be in the I-80 corridor," he said on Friday. "Seventy percent of our business is more reachable from this corridor to northwestern Indiana and the south suburbs."

Starting April 6, Central will begin distributing groceries to 250 clients, including Strack and Van Til, Berkot's, Walt's and Wiseway. At the end of April, when Central combines with Certified Grocers of Hodgkins, the company will add another 150 clients, Denges said.

The total operation will employ about 500 people; 150 are new positions and some of those hires have come from Certified's staff. The headquarters staff was increased by about 20 people, Denges said.

"It's a corporate headquarters and that's something we've put as a top priority for new business recruitment," said John Greuling, president and CEO of the Will County Center for Economic Development.

Another priority for the county is to recruit food industry businesses because they're better able to weather economic downturns, Greuling said.

"It hits two of our bulls-eyes on our business recruitment strategy," he said.

Though Central is receiving a five-year, 50-percent property tax abatement, the company will add hundreds of thousands of tax dollars to local coffers in the coming years, Greuling added. Central also received a \$3.8 million state tax credit and an \$87,500 Employer Training and Investment Program grant.

The building will be the first in the world to power all of its machinery by hydrogen fuel cell technology provided by Plug Power, Denges said. The equipment is more expensive up front, but it will pay in the end by being more efficient and better for the environment, he said.

"You not using electricity. Hydrogen is a product of air and water and the by-product is distilled water. It's a very safe by-product."

Hydrogen fuel cells run longer, don't lose power as they operate and are refueled more quickly than batteries, Denges said.

The 934,490-square-foot-building includes a 45,000-square-foot office complex and a 340,000-square-foot freezer/cooler. Grubb & Ellis represented Central in the land acquisition in the summer of 2008 and the purchase of the building, which was constructed by Northern Builders.

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