

# Animal Health Commission Seeks New Diagnostic Lab

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**HARRISBURG** (Dauphin Co.) — Pennsylvania livestock producers can expect to see a new, \$6.7 million diagnostic laboratory replace the deteriorating Summerdale facility within the next several years, if recommendations of the state Animal Health Commission are heeded.

On Thursday, the nine-member Animal Health Commission met in the state Department of Agriculture Building to discuss the condition of the state's animal health laboratories and what could be done to improve the situation.

The result was a unanimous approval to seek the construction of a \$6.7 million laboratory wing to the existing state agriculture building, located across from the state Farm Show complex along Cameron Street in Harrisburg.

The laboratory is to replace the deteriorated Summerdale Diagnostic Laboratory building, which has been in need of work for some time.

The Summerdale facility is also the headquarters for the Department of Agriculture's Region VI offices. The members of the commission approved eventually moving the Region VI staff, who are currently officed at Summerdale, to vacant office space within the agriculture department building.

Cutbacks in manpower and full-time services at the department of agriculture over the years have allowed space within the building to be available for the Region VI staff.

The decision to build a new facility has to be approved by the state Legislature and governor as part of the capital budget plan, part of the long-range budget-making process.

The existing Summerdale Diagnostic Lab sits on 60 acres of state land located in Cumberland County near the intersection of I81 and Rt.11-15, considered prime commercial land.

The hope is that the possible sale of the property would offset almost \$1 million of the cost of building a

new laboratory. However, the proceeds from a sale, if it does occur, will not be used by the Department of Agriculture, but would be part of the state's General Fund. The General Fund receives the bulk of its monies from taxes.

The intended plan would be to get approval for the \$6.7 million construction, build the facility and then move equipment and personnel into the new facility before ceasing operations at Summerdale.

Official estimates are that the soonest the new diagnostic laboratory would be online would be 1994-95. That estimate is based on full cooperation between state agencies, including the governor's office and the Office of the Budget, which currently controls the state's purse strings at the direction of the governor.

Having a project included in the capital budget does not mean that the project will be completed within a specific time. Renovation and expansion of the state Farm Show Building Complex was authorized under the capital

budget many years ago, but is only being completed now.

Members of the commission expressed a hope and commitment to ensure that the same fate does not befall the sorely needed diagnostic facility.

The commission settled on constructing a semi-detached wing to the agriculture building after hearing three proposals.

One proposal was to renovate the existing Summerdale lab building for \$4 million; rebuild the building at Summerdale for \$6.6 million; or seek the \$6.7 million facility at Cameron Street.

On an amount-only basis, renovation appears to be the most inexpensive, but members said that with additional problems inherent in the existing facility, the renovation would not improve overall performance.

Rep. Kenneth Cole, chairman of the House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee said it has been his experience, especially with a specific state renovation of a veterinarian's hospital, that overhead costs

and maintenance costs are not significantly reduced and that renovations can frequently go into cost overruns because of unforeseen problems. "Even if you remodel an old house, you still have an old house," he said.

Furthermore, the savings in security, support staff, equipment, energy use and communications would be significantly reduced with a lab wing at the Cameron Street location.

Currently the 60-acre Summerdale facility has to have its own security personnel, mailroom and support staff. Those services are already existing at the agriculture department building.

"It would be a better facility," Cole said, "all of it is at one location."

Furthermore, the secretary of agriculture would be close to the laboratory and have a better ability to be on top of developments in the efforts to diagnose and control animal diseases.

The existing Summerdale facility is not a showcase for the agriculture department, according to Cole. "I've been appalled at the conditions of the 63-year-old facility. It's antiquated and outdated, and the physical plant has not been kept up. I think the agricultural industry in Pennsylvania deserves better."

According to Rep. Cole, fellow House member and chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, Rep. Dwight Evans, will support the decision. Evans and Cole had inspected the Summerdale Laboratory recently.

"I'm sure Dwight Evans shares my sentiments exactly," Cole said.

Sheila Miller, executive director of the Senate Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee, who also served on the subcommittee which recommended the possibility of constructing a diagnostic wing at Cameron Street, said that Sen. Edward Helfrick, for whom she speaks, also supports the move.

She said that should the decision be supported and be authorized in the Capital Budget, which appears to be likely, "It will be up to the ag community to press the governor to release those funds."

Cole said that for certain, years and years of delay, such as was the case with the Farm Show Building, will not be the case.

"It took over 20 years, after money was put in, to renovate the Farm Show building," Cole said. "I assure you, it will not take that long."

Cole also gave credit to Boyd Wolff, secretary of agriculture, for initiating efforts to review the Summerdale situation. "I applaud him for initiating study last October."

Although a specific site has not been decided upon, the most likely site will be acreage on the north end of the agriculture building where dilapidated poultry research buildings are currently barely standing.

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