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Athol Slaughterhouse Rises from the Ashes

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Athol Slaughterhouse Rises from the Ashes

Madeleine Charney Granby

By now, many of you have heard about the tragic fire that leveled Adams Farm, the slaughterhouse located at 775 Bearsden Road in Athol, this past December. During a recent phone interview, co-owner Noreen Heath reflected on the extent of the damage, describing their loss in one succinct statement, "We didn't even have a knife left." A knife-the most basic tool of the slaughterhouse. All gone.

Fortunately, the situation has turned around, thanks to an outpouring of local and state support. Heath and co-owners Richard Adams (her brother) and Beverly Adams (their mother) will be breaking ground as soon as mud season lets up. They hope to open their doors for business by September or October, heralded by a public tour and open house celebration.

Heath and Richard Adams designed the buildings under the tutelage of Dennis Group, LLC, a firm that specializes in the planning, design, architecture, engineering, and construction of food manufacturing and processing facilities. D.R. Poulin Construction Company of Fitchburg will carry out construction.

The new facilities will be funded largely by the Farm Viability Enhancement Program, offered through Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR). This program is designed to help farmers remain on family land and stave off development, which threatens to obliterate family farms. Adding a dramatic twist to their story, Heath explained that Adams Farm had formalized the agreement with MDAR the day before the fire occurred. Therefore, plans for expanding the store were already in motion, making it somewhat easier to pick up the pieces and get rolling with construction.

Additional financial support came from donations gathered by Athol Savings Bank. A total of \$5,000 was raised from established customers and local citizens but also from people whose names, Heath marvelled, she did not even recognize. Some of these mystery donors live many miles away from the farm. Heath also expressed deep gratitude for the consistent guidance and support they received from Sen. Stephen Brewer as well as Daniel Beaudette and David Tuttle from the USDA Rural Development State Office.

Choosing to resurrect this "high risk business" sounded like a clear decision for the three owners. With many of their customers waiting in the wings as the farm is being rebuilt, Heath exclaimed, "We're not going to let them down!" As one of the last remaining USDA-inspected processing facility/slaughterhouses in Massachusetts, these customers from all over New England will be relieved to return to a more local source for their farms' slaughtering needs. The economic strain of traveling great distances to slaughterhouses will soon be alleviated once Adams Farm is back in operation. Various employees also expect to return to work at the farm this autumn.

The new site for the both the slaughterhouse and retail store will be across the street where the original slaughterhouse stood from 1958 through the mid '70s. (The land was used as a dairy farm from 1919-1957). The slaughterhouse will be three times larger than the last facility, allowing for increased speed, efficiency, and productivity. The retail store will expand to four times its former size, adding local produce and dairy products alongside the wide selection of meats. Area farmers and dairies are invited to contact Adams Farm about selling their products in the new storefront. Heath explained that they are pleased to provide a new outlet for local farmers. "We want to do even more for local farmers who have a product to sell."

Fire-while dangerous and destructive (thankfully no humans or animals were harmed)-can also have the power to transform people and places. Forged by fire, the success of the new and improved Adams Farm seems guaranteed. Contact Adams Farm at 978 249-9441.

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