OPINION

**Guest Column: Madison Food Park an 'amazing' opportunity**

Kurt A. Rockeman, Livestock Economist Published 1:10 p.m. MT Jan. 16, 2020 | Updated 2:19 p.m. MT Jan. 16, 2020

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When I listen to and read comments about the proposed Madison Food Park I am struck by the negativity, that it is a bad thing to which the public is and should be, strongly opposed.



Kurt A. Rockeman, livestock economist (Photo: KURT A. ROCKEMAN)

But I am excited.

This is an amazing economic opportunity for local agriculture and businesses. I know folks are worried about population growth, water quality, and environmental impact.  But what about the economic opportunities it will generate?  And, what about the proposed use of green technologies and practices to mitigate environmental issues?

The popular image of the meat packing industry, as described by Upton Sinclair in “The Jungle” in 1906, is history.  Modern meat processing technologies and practices ensure the highest food safety standards and minimize negative impacts.

The project profile clearly states, “the design, development and infrastructure will reflect a commitment to incorporating alternative energy and energy efficient technology in the areas of solar, wind, geothermal, bio-mass, carbon reduction, waste-water filtration and treatment.”

These are the reality of today’s modern meat processing industry and deserve a fair hearing.

The direct employment (3,000 jobs) created will bring a welcome infusion of workers and income to Great Falls.  It may mean a 10% increase in population, but these are not low-paid, unskilled, transients laboring in poor working conditions. They are semi- and highly skilled workers (meat cutters, electricians, engineers, plumbers) and professionals (quality control, food safety, IT, administration) with a host of employment and career opportunities.

Most of the estimated direct payroll of over $100 million/year will be spent locally on housing, groceries, food, clothing, furniture, transportation and entertainment.

It will give the stagnant housing market a shot in the arm, encourage construction and business startups, increase school enrollment, create more traffic, and bring new people to town – that’s what happens with a growing economy.

We have the rare combination of space, infrastructure and local talent to take advantage of these opportunities.  Why is this a bad thing?

I know there are issues that need to be addressed and mitigated but claims of potential damage to land and water resources are seriously overstated.  The facility will use 3 million gallons of water daily, (roughly what Big Timber uses), representing 3% of 159 million gallons/day flowing from Giant Springs.

The direct environmental footprint of 4 square miles is 1/700 of the area of Cascade County.  In my experience that level of impact can be successfully managed and mitigated by a responsible operator.  That is what licensing and permits are all about, public enforcement of reasonable standards and regulation of industrial behavior and practice.

We need to seize the opportunity, recognizing that the Madison Food Park is a once in a generation chance for Great Falls to break out of its funk, revive its spirit, and recreate itself as a dynamic city welcoming responsible investment and growth.

Somewhere a city that will reap the benefits of processing Montana livestock into high quality food products.

Why not us?

*Kurt A. Rockeman is an agricultural economist and international consultant and a 1970 graduate of Stevensville High School. He said he has never been associated with the investors in the proposed Madison Food Park.*