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Stokely announces the end of corn canning in Hoopeston

Canning pale yellow spikes of sweet corn has been the backbone of Hoopeston's economy for more than a century.

That backbone is now broken.

Employees at Hoopeston's Stokely USA plant were told Friday that corn will no longer be canned at the facility, ending a tradition dating back to the 1870s.

The decision to discontinue corn processing is part of a Stokely restructuring process, said company president Steve Theobald.

To cut costs, the Oconomowoc, Wis.-based company sold its corporate headquarters and will focus on its most profitable segments, Theobald said. Stokely will also close plants, in Wells, Minn. and Merrill, Wis.

With corn gone, the local plant will shift its emphasis to pumpkin processing. The market for private label pumpkin has grown in the last five years, Theobald said.

There are no plans to expand pumpkin canning, "at least not initially," Theobald said. The Hoopeston plant

processed 1.5 million cases of pumpkin last year and approximately 1 million cases of corn this year.

Stokely is also looking for other ways to use the Hoopeston plant, said local plant manager Bill Nicholls. "They've mandated that I find something else," he said. "That's going to be my mission for the next several weeks."

Nicholls said he will try to find a "not too capital-intensive crop" which can be processed locally.

The company will also "take a real hard look at what we're doing as far as distribution," Theobald said.

Another option, Theobald said, is to co-pack for other companies during the off season.

No immediate personnel changes are planned at Hoopeston, Nicholls said. Stokely has nine full-time, year-round employees who will continue to operate the warehouse and maintain equipment through the winter.

It is the company's 225 seasonal local and migrant

See CORN on other side

City officials raise fee for springing run-away canines

Getting a pooch from the pound is going to cost Hoopeston residents more.

The Hoopeston city council Tuesday night unanimously approved increasing the fee to rescue dogs impounded by the humane officer.

The fee will be raised to \$10, up from \$5. The \$5 fee is less than the actual cost under the city's contract with the Hoopeston-Cissna Park Veterinary Service.

Under the contract, the city pays \$400 monthly to house a maximum of 25 animals, averaging \$16 per animal said Alderman John Haughee.


While the fee is still less than actual costs, officials said the loss is less than what was suffered when the city ran a dog pound.

Alderman Bill Goodwine asked if higher fines for those who repeatedly allow their dogs to roam should be included in the ordinance raising the fee, but city attorney Jim Spiros said the judge can impose a maximum fine of \$500 without changing the ordinance further.

In other business, the council:

learned a new sidewalk will begin being poured Wednesday in the 200 block of East Main St. The city is replacing the sidewalk on the south side of the street this year and will do the north side next year.

learned renovations at the Floral Hill Cemetery are complete. The chapel has been used for some funeral services and will be the site of a wedding later this



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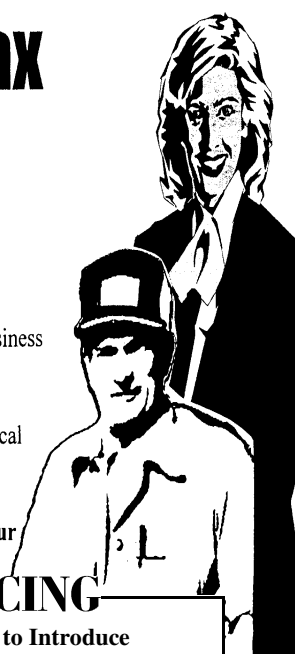
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Corn continued from other side

employees who will be most affected. They will not be called to work next year until pumpkin pack begins in mid-September.

This is not the first time Stokely has considered shutting down corn processing in Hoopeston. "We had an abortive run at this several years ago," Theobald said.

After a 1992 boiler explosion severely damaged the plant, company officials announced they would discontinue corn canning in 1993. The decision was later rescinded because growing conditions in other states were not as favorable as those locally.

Theobald and Nicholls said the changes do not mean the plant will close. "Even if we did nothing but pumpkin...it would remain an important facility for us," Theobald said.

"We're still alive," Nicholls said. "Don't call the undertaker just yet. We made it through one disaster. We can do it again."

As company officials are trying to remain optimistic, so, too, are city officials.

"It's a bad situation," Mayor Bob Ault said, adding lifestyle changes are part of the reason not only for the change at Stokely, but also for a planned cutback of workers at Silgan Containers in Hoopeston. "It's all tied

in together," he said.

While admitting things look dark, Ault said Hoopeston will pull through. "We'll survive," he said.

Corn canning more than jobs

The end of corn processing means more than just the loss of jobs in Hoopeston.

Corn canning has been Hoopeston's backbone for over a century and is a part of the community's history.

Corn is represented in the city's motto, "Sweetcorn Capital of the World"; the school mascot, the Cornjerker; and the whistle blowing to signal the end of corn-canning.

The most public display of the relationship between Hoopeston and corn is the National Sweetcorn Festival, held each Labor Day Weekend.

The festival, sponsored by the Hoopeston Jaycees, draws tens of thousands of visitors for free, hot, buttered sweetcorn.

In previous years, Stokely has provided corn for the festival. That is something the company hopes to continue. "I hadn't really thought about it, but I would imagine we'll make our best effort to get corn for the festival," said plant manager Bill

Police News



Laura Bibb, 319½ E. Maple, reported Tuesday that someone took a cellular phone from her unlocked car while the car was parked at her home.

Court dispositions



Sept. 5: Benjamin Combs, Cissna Park, \$95 fine and costs; continued to Sept. 19.

Heather Davis, Hoopeston, to pay \$45; continued.

In the Hospital



Hoopeston Community Memorial Hospital
Sept. 30, 1996

Admitted: Zola Sheffield, Hoopeston.

Discharged: Deanna Smith, William Green and Sharon Smith, all of Hoopeston.

Weather



Partly sunny, cooler today. High in the mid 70s, then dropping. Tonight, clear, cold. Low in the mid 30s. Tomorrow, sunny. High near 56, low near 46.

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