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## Sweetgrass Farms in South Manatee County wants to open store, save historical building

BY JANELLE O'DEA

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MANATEE -- Growing healthy plants and growing a solid business are the same, at least for James Demler at Sweetgrass Farms.

Demler completed an important step in expanding the Sweetgrass Farms business this week. The Manatee County Commission passed a resolution vacating two right-of-ways near the Sweetgrass Farms property, meaning Demler can now use them as he sees fit.

Demler plans to open a store on the property to sell produce from Sweetgrass Farms. The hydroponic farm in South Manatee County has been open since last fall and has 40,000 plants across 3.5 acres of the 7-acre property at 8350 Carolina St.

Sweetgrass Farms uses the Verti-Gro system, or vertical gardening, which has been featured in Disney's EPCOT. Growing pots are stacked on a tower and filled with ground coconut husks, and nutrients and water are dripped at the top of the tower, flowing into the pots.



Jose Torres, general manager of Sweetgrass Farms, takes a water sample to check the pH and nutrient levels of the filtered-water solution feeding the plants. PAUL VIDELA/Bradenton Herald

Instead of constructing a building and in line with his company's philosophy, Demler hopes to move a historic house from South Osprey Avenue in Sarasota to use as the storefront. The one he's looking at right now is about 3,000 square feet.

The cost of the house would be minimal because it is being considered for demolition, Demler said. He estimates moving expenses to be somewhere around \$20,000.

"I think it's important to preserve these things," Demler said. "If I don't do something with it or someone else didn't they'd tear it down." In addition to selling Sweetgrass Farms produce, other foods coming from producers with similar philosophies will be considered.

"Organic, safe, fresh, non-GMO; as long as it fits into that philosophy I think we'd like to have other things there," Demler said.

Demler has a friend who produces cheese and another who makes sauces, often from ingredients found at Sweetgrass Farms.

Sweetgrass Farms sells to several Sarasota restaurants and catering companies including Caragiulos, Owen's Fish Camp and Mattison's. The public also can buy products during specified hours. Sweetgrass Farms sets up at the Sarasota Farmer's Market on Saturdays.

Demler envisions a scenario where a new building may be appropriate. His dream for the future includes an on-site, farm-to-table restaurant.

In addition to expanding the Sweetgrass Farms business and preserving historical property, Demler said he wants to take control of the right-of-ways so he can mitigate illegal dumping that's been happening "for decades."

"I spent a fortune hauling stuff out of there trying to improve property," he said. "I've pulled boats out of there."

The Sweetgrass Farms expansion is "another example of partnership with businesses and the county," said Robin DiSabatino, Manatee County Commissioner for district four, where Sweetgrass Farms is located north of University Parkway and east of U.S. 301. "South County is booming and is very diverse."

The right-of-ways approved on Tuesday have been controlled by Manatee County since the 1920's when the land was platted. The county doesn't have fee simple ownership in these situations, said Todd Boyle, manager of Manatee County's property management survey division. Instead they have rights to the property in case of a need to build roads or satisfy other needs.

When the county ceases its rights, as they chose to after Demler's application, the rights transfer to the owners of adjacent properties. In this case, Demler's company Blue Heaven Enterprises LLC owns the surrounding property.

Before the application is approved, the applicant must go through the process outlined in Manatee County's land development code. This includes a jurisdictional review by several Manatee County departments and a final review by the county attorney.

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