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First deliveries made to ONT Seacoast Regional Food Hub

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SALISBURY — Local food pantries forced to travel to Boston now can cut down on the driving thanks to Our Neighbors' Table's Seacoast Regional Food Hub, which received its first food deliveries Friday.

“We've been waiting three years to get the deliveries from the Greater Boston Food Bank here, and now that our docks are finally ready, we've already had three days of deliveries to eight different organizations across the region,” ONT Executive Director Lyndsey Haight said.

On Friday morning, local communities leaders including Amesbury Mayor Kassandra Gove and Newburyport Mayor Sean Reardon visited the Bridge Road food hub to get a first-hand glimpse on its progress.

"Lyndsey is just a force of nature, and anytime I go there and get to see her speak, I learn something. And then to have her walk us through the construction and the progress that they've made on the

building, it was so encouraging," Reardon said after the visit.

Those who gathered Friday were able to see three local nonprofits receive their deliveries.

"This morning, we had Our Neighbors' Table, Newbury Food Pantry, and Open Heart Ministries out of Haverhill," Haight said.

While the deliveries serve as a major milestone for the hub, it is only the first step toward its grand opening as its market and storage facilities are not yet ready. Assuming all funding is secured, the hub officials are hoping to be fully operational by Labor Day.

ONT has raised \$4.2 million toward the \$7.8 million they need for the project.

"We've got to hit that \$7.8 million dollars by Labor Day, and that means that pledges will be paid off through 2026. If that happens, then we'll have come out of this project debt free," Haight said.

Haight explained that if they are able to hit their goal of \$7.8 million by Labor Day, they will be able to pay off pledges through 2026 and emerge from the project debt free.

"We'll be able to focus all of our day to day resources, time and energy on best serving those 32,000 people," Haight said.

The project and fundraising are both on schedule, according to Haight.

The concept of the Seacoast Food Hub was first brought up in 2020, with the groundbreaking ceremony held in August 2023.

Once complete, the 24,000-square-foot facility would significantly expand the region's ability to collect and store surplus food from grocers, wholesalers, restaurants and other sources.

The food hub includes 7,000 square feet of dry storage, 3,000 square feet of cold storage, and a Greater Boston Food Bank cross-dock that will allow for larger and more efficient deliveries and distribution for frontline food providers.

“When this facility is up and running, they are going to be able to reach 30 more communities in the area. That is an outstanding accomplishment because we have found that one in three residents in Massachusetts is food insecure,” Greater Boston Food Bank Chief Operating Operator Cheryl Schondek said.

She praised the food hub as something the state needs desperately.

“If we could take this facility and duplicate it and replicate it in other cities and towns in which we operate, maybe we could end hunger here,” Schondek said.

For many organizations, Haight said the journey to Boston for deliveries from the Greater Boston Food Bank could easily take three hours, plus the cost of the trucks, the drivers, and the volunteer time.

“Now they are able to do it within a 15-, 20 mile-radius,” Haight said.

Matt Petry covers Amesbury and Salisbury for The Daily News of Newburyport.

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