

Syngenta plants deeper roots as Greensboro corporate mainstay

Richard Craver – Nov 3, 2024

The unveiling Wednesday of a \$140 million laboratory and research facility highlights more than just the importance of advanced technology for the future of Syngenta Crop Protection and farmers statewide and globally.



A Syngenta scientist works in one of the labs at the company's new \$140 million campus in Greensboro. Syngenta, which sells agricultural chemicals, said that because the Swing Road site was established in the mid-1960s, renovations or a relocation were a necessity. Walt Unks, Winston-Salem Journal

It also exemplifies the company's decision to plant deeper roots in the soil off Swing Road in Greensboro, a site Syngenta and its predecessors have called home for nearly 60 years. Completion of the nearly five-year project makes clear that the North America Crop Protection headquarters and about 700 employees have stayed put.

Syngenta, which sells agricultural chemicals and performs biotechnology research, said that because the Swing Road site was established in the mid-1960s, renovations or a relocation were a necessity.

The manufacturer had been discussing its options for a new site since mid-2019, including other sites in Guilford County, as well as in Research Triangle Park, Chicago, Minneapolis and other areas.

The expansion features 100,456 square feet of renovated laboratory space, 35,933 square feet of new laboratory space and 85,624 square feet of new office space.

That brings the total square footage on the campus to more than 473,000 within 17 buildings on 70 acres.

"It's a major investment at \$140 million, and it's important that people love where they live, so our employees can feel at ease that we're — and they're — staying in Greensboro," said Vern Hawkins, president of Syngenta Crop Protection North America.

Syngenta had announced its plan to stay in Greensboro in March 2021. At that time, the company was projecting a \$68 million capital investment.

Elevating the final costs were several features that Syngenta officials said broadened the scope of their plan: connecting the area between the R&D labs and sales and marketing teams; upgraded safety system; expanded conference and public spaces; and employee health and wellness amenities.

"These features and others like them raised the investment level of the project to \$120 million," Syngenta said.

"Increased costs associated with our challenging economic environment for such projects (interest, inflation, etc.), have made the final investment level \$140 million."

Hawkins said the company "wanted to design an office that would be a great fit for our collaborative culture."

"We have been able to build a more productive office with everyone under one roof for a really similar cost as trying to put a new HVAC system in all the older buildings.

"It was just a smarter decision for the employees and the business."

Brent Christensen, president and chief executive of Greensboro Chamber of Commerce, said Syngenta's commitment is "a milestone" for both the company and the local community.

"Syngenta's presence in our city has been vital to fostering economic growth and creating meaningful jobs," Christensen said.

Syngenta's jobs in Greensboro pay an average of more than \$100,000 a year and include researchers and business executives in the agricultural field.

"By choosing to redevelop and expand your headquarters, Syngenta has once again demonstrated a steadfast commitment to our region ... and a profound investment," Christensen said.

Syngenta "has long stood out as a bedrock advanced technology with deep roots in the Greensboro community dating back to CIBA-GEIGY," said Keith Debbage, professor emeritus of UNC Greensboro's Department of Geography, Environment and Sustainability.

Debbage said his department has a long-standing relationship with Syngenta, including providing graduate-student internships.

"The company has a long history of offering high-wage job openings that allow for upward mobility," Debbage said.

"The grand opening of the new corporate headquarters further solidifies its standing in the Triad economy."

Subject to change

"I would feel very good about us being here for the long term," Hawkins said.

Hawkins' confidence and enthusiasm notwithstanding, the Triad has learned many times since the 1960s that "the long term" can be subject to change.

A short — and painful to remember — list includes BB&T Corp., Burlington Industries, Krispy Kreme, VF Corp. and Wachovia Corp. exiting corporate headquarters, as well as dramatic workforce downsizings, such as at HanesBrands Inc. Jefferson Pilot and R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co., and the closing of the Dell Inc. desktop-assembly plant.

There are locals who are uncomfortable that the parent Syngenta Global AG, although headquartered in Basel, Switzerland, is part of the Syngenta Group that is entirely owned by Sinochem, a Chinese state-owned enterprise.

In recent years, Greensboro and the Triad have enjoyed remarkable success in recruiting advanced manufacturers — foremost Boom Supersonic and Marshall USA at Piedmont Triad International Airport and Toyota Battery Manufacturing NC in Liberty.

Syngenta's main competition by far in hiring for advanced manufacturing and technology jobs is the projected 5,100 Toyota workforce at its \$13.9 billion electric-vehicle battery plant in Liberty.

The Triad has at least 31 advanced manufacturing projects in various levels of construction, production and expansion representing at least 12,666 in job-creation pledges.

Job applicants with the appropriate skills and willingness to commute have a diverse set of work and career opportunities from which to choose, ranging from supersonic aircraft and electric

vehicle batteries to commercial ventilation fans, pet-food processing and biopharmaceutical products.

Christensen said that finding and training that many workers "is a good problem to have, but still a problem."

He said it will take continuing communication and collaboration between corporations and the local universities and community colleges to provide that training, and the state legislature needs to pump in more workforce development funding before the big splashes from the Job Development Investment Grant and One North Carolina Fund incentive programs.

Legacy mover and shaker

Yet, the Syngenta expansion shows how legacy corporations can remain relevant and an economic mover and shaker.

Although there wasn't a job-creation component per se to the expanded campus, Hawkins said the company "expects the workforce to continue growing over time as the company grows, and this facility helps us to retain our employees."

"Most people when they step into our building, they feel the helpfulness of the employees, and that tends to be important to new graduates and those joining companies from other companies."

Syngenta being a global company connects the Triad with its international network of customers and suppliers, said John H. Boyd, founder and principal with global site-selection firm The Boyd Co. of Boca Raton, Fla.

"It creates unique economic development opportunities for the region on the international front," Boyd said.

"Syngenta, with its global constituencies and wherewithal to locate to other attractive U.S. locations, choosing to stay in Greensboro is a huge endorsement of the Triad workforce.

"Syngenta's working relationship with elected local and state officials, UNC Greensboro's outstanding agriculture technology program, and the overall positive nature of North Carolina business climate, are pluses as well."

Christensen said while he and the chamber are thankful for each successful recruitment, "it's just as important to support the companies staying and expanding in North Carolina, like Syngenta."

"It's about relationships, about the people, the cooperation and partnership between corporations and local governments. I believe all that still matters."