

By Emily Ford (eford@salisbury.com)

KANNAPOLIS — The responsibility of educating and training a workforce for the N.C. Research Campus falls in large part to Rowan-Cabarrus Community College.

Leaders say they're ready.

"We will be called on to do a lot, and we will do a lot," president Dr. Carol Spalding said at a recent RCCC Board of Trustees meeting.

Spalding helped break ground Friday for a state-of-the-art building at the Research Campus.

The facility will house the college's new associate degree programs in biotechnology and agricultural biotechnology, as well as continuing education programs related to biotech and clinical research.

The degree programs are designed to prepare local residents to meet future workforce needs of the Research Campus.

When fully operational, the programs could graduate up to 40 students a year, said Tim Foley, RCCC academic vice president.

Until the new building opens, probably in August 2010, students may enroll in biotech classes mostly held at the Cabarrus County campus.

Once open, the new building will provide a more realistic, hands-on experience for RCCC students. It will include multiple science and computer laboratories and classrooms with a full array of technology.

An aseptic bioprocessing suite on the top floor will replicate the sophisticated environments found in biotech industries.

Community colleges specialize in tailoring curriculum and classes to meet the needs of local employers.

RCCC has not yet had "conversations of consequence" with private industry at the Research Campus, Foley said, but he expected those talks to begin soon.

"The employment picture on campus and in the community around the campus has been unclear," he said.

That will start to change, he said.

RCCC has had preliminary discussions with N.C. State University about sharing use of a future greenhouse complex, which also has been delayed. The schools do not have a formal agreement, Foley said.

Access to a greenhouse is crucial, he said.

RCCC graduates with the biotech degree can work as lab technicians, research assistants and quality control associates. They might work for small testing labs, large manufacturers, government laboratories and research universities.

Students who graduate with the ag biotech degree could work as research assistants to biologists and chemists, laboratory and instrumentation technicians and quality control/quality assurance technicians.

They might find work in research and development, manufacturing, sales, customer service and the production of bioengineered crops.