

# New network for food businesses

By Goya Bennett

WHITTLESEA'S food manufacturing sector will be beefed up with the formation of a food industry cluster by Whittlesea Council

The Food Manufacturing Cluster Project was started by the council to create networking opportunities for local food-related businesses in rural and urban areas.

The council's economic development department director John Francis identified about 180 small and large companies as potential cluster members.

He said the cluster would stimulate the growth in one of Whittlesea's largest sectors and help members save money

through collective buying of common services.

"A small company of eight to 10 people may have little chance to negotiate a range of contracts, but with all these companies joining forces they can negotiate better deals for all members of the cluster, such as cleaning contracts or marketing.

"Aside from buying powers, one of the strengths of the region has been its diverse multicultural community tapping into many culinary skills and traditions."

Mr Francis said the cluster had already received good returns — two local firms have won export contracts worth a total \$5 million.

"With such a large number of

food-manufacturing companies, we saw an enormous opportunity in the area.

"It is about joining forces to explore further business opportunities in the region.

"It does not matter if a business is established in the area or planning to relocate, they can benefit from joining the cluster."

Becoming a member would be a "straight-out win" for a business. "There is no cost for the business aside from a regular commitment of their time, and the benefits are tangible."

The cluster is also aimed at helping boutique or niche-market food businesses expand their markets. For further details, phone 92172123.