

Food cluster wins fans

BY SARAH MANTON

LOCAL small businesses are experiencing big business pulling power.

The City of Whittlesea has been working in partnership with the State Government and Hume City Council to develop a northern-suburbs food industry cluster.

A year after the project was launched, businesses involved have announced a significant improvement in their profitability and effectiveness.

Small business owner Jim Konas of Hellenic Cheese Farm in Epping is a staunch advocate of the initiative.

He said the cluster was a unique opportunity for businesses to reduce costs and increase their export.

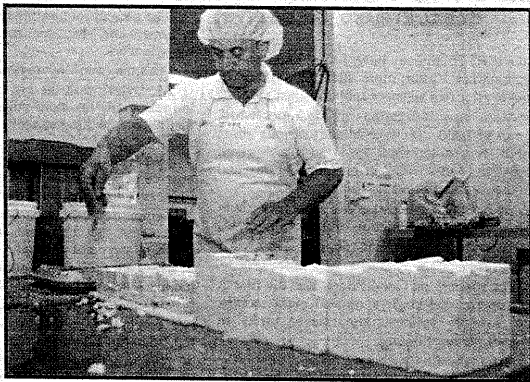
"I was initially drawn to the project because I could see its potential, particularly because of its structure and the tremendous advantages it has for small businesses," Mr Konas said.

"We are now purchasing materials at a cost equal to that of national companies such as The Original Juice Company.

"We are seeing a significant reduction in costs, improved efficiency in all areas of the business and greater profits."

Mr Konas has owned and managed Hellenic Cheese for the past nine years.

As the first company in Australia to produce dairy products from non-traditional ingredients, the company captures a particular niche market, export-



Strength in numbers ... Jim Konas readies blocks of feta at Hellenic Cheese in Epping.

Picture: DAMJAN JANEVSKI.

ing about half its produce to Asia.

"Dairy products have always been made with cows' milk, but we saw the opportunity to develop specialised gourmet products using goat and sheep milk," Mr Konas said.

"Educating consumers to this possibility has always been somewhat of a challenge, but we are able to expand on our current networks through this initiative and further grow our marketplace."

Food manufacturing is one of the largest industries in the northern sub-

urbs, and the group was formed with the purpose of stimulating further growth through collaboration and a common purpose.

Businesses involved are experiencing savings of 10 to 40 per cent on food chemical supplies and gaining access into new local and export markets.

Later this month two information sessions will be held in both Whittlesea and Hume to outline the benefits of the project and to encourage further businesses to join.