

Extension Districts in Kansas - Frequently Asked Questions

Budget shortfalls in the late 1980s and legislation in 1987 that froze local government budgets challenged K-State Research and Extension to find ways to keep delivering quality educational programs to Kansans.

Other needs, including scientific and social problems not limited by county boundaries, were identified as officials worked to come up with programs and structures that better served Kansans.

A solution came in the form of the Kansas Extension District Law passed by the state legislature in 1991. The law paved the way for two or more county Extension councils to form Extension districts.

Q: How many counties in Kansas have already formed districts?

A: As of 2021, 59 counties have formed 21 Extension districts.

Q: What is driving the interest in forming additional Extension districts?

A: Three things. First, we all know there are changing demographics in Kansas, including declining population in some areas and increasing population in others. Changing demographics mean changing economic climates in communities. Some counties can afford only one or two agents which leaves a huge burden on those agents to meet a multitude of programming needs for the county's citizens.

Secondly, we've identified a need for relevant, more effective, high quality specialized programs, that often require personnel who have specific skills. Kansans have indicated a need for more in-depth subject matter knowledge from Extension agents. This isn't always possible when an Extension agent has to divide time between several Extension program areas and thus cannot focus on the more in-depth issues. Those six or eight agents who are stretched thin in their own counties can be much more effective at focusing if they can specialize and collectively serve a broader population.

Third, funding for staffing is a problem. The average county Extension council's budget is financed about 80 percent with county funds and 20 percent state and federal funds. But many counties, that have the authority to determine county Extension council funds, have not been able to provide enough funds for salary and benefits of personnel and operational expenses. Districting will allow counties to combine resources and become more efficient.

Q: If a county's Extension office becomes part of a district, does it mean the county office will close?

A: This is a decision that districts will make depending on changing demographic and programming needs. The districts that have formed to date have decided to maintain offices in each of the counties of the district. The public still has access to local Extension agents, although some of the responsibilities will change due to the agent's areas of specialization.

Q: What will it mean for agents? Won't they be stretched even more thinly?

A: Right now, county agents are expected to cover a broad array of programming areas. For example, an agent might be expected to give programs on tree care, soil fertility, livestock nutrition and also help with 4-H programming in addition to a myriad of other program areas. That's a lot for one person to juggle. With districting, the agents can be more specialized, and while they may have farther to travel (to several counties rather than just one), the horticulture agent would be able to focus on horticulture issues, for example, and the crops and soils agent could focus on agronomic issues.

It also means that agents can better utilize the time they spend planning and preparing programs because they will be delivering those programs to a larger audience across several counties. That makes the system more efficient.

Q: How will this benefit residents of the counties that form the district?

A: This is a situation where Kansans will get more bang for their buck. With agents able to focus more on a particular area, the quality of the programs and the depth of information delivered to residents in the district will improve. The agents may have somewhat less direct contact with some of the clientele, but the programs available will increase in quality and quantity with several agents coming into the county to deliver programs.

Q: What would agents staffing look like in a typical district Extension office?

A: That would depend on needs set forth by the district council as well as funding. There would be a district director who would have some programming responsibilities as well as administrative duties. This allows the consolidation of administrative responsibilities to one person, freeing up other agents to devote more time to programming. In addition there may be a community vitality agent; a crop production agent; a family and consumer sciences (FCS)/nutrition and food safety agent; an FCS/family and child development agent; a 4-H youth development agent; a horticulture agent; and a livestock agent.

Q: What about the downside to districting? Surely there must be some.

A: Some people worry about local access to their agent. County Extension agents have been generalists that people can go to for information on many topics. In a district, agents will be more specialized and will be programming beyond the county where they are based, so access to a particular agent may change. But with current communication technology, many of those issues can be overcome and residents will have access to several agents who have specialized, more in-depth knowledge.

Q: Will county citizens lose local control of Extension programming?

A: Extension districts rely on strong local governance. Each county in an Extension district would be represented by four district governing body members that are elected by the residents of their county. Program development committees for the district will include people from every county involved in district programming.

Q: How are Extension districts funded?

A: Extension councils receive their local funds from a tax levied upon all taxable tangible property in the county. The district governing body will present a budget that consists of state and federal funds, and upon approval, local funds.

Q: Is it possible for a county to either get into or out of an existing district?

A: Yes, there are procedures in place for either of those actions to occur.

Q: Do the counties in districts still have individual county fairs?

A: County fairs are run by fair boards or associations in most counties of Kansas. Extension districts support the local fair.

Q: Do other states have Extension districts?

A: Most of our surrounding states have gone to some form of multi-county staffing and programming.

For more information about forming Extension districts, interested persons can call their K-State Research and Extension regional director, or Chris Onstad at 785-532-3519.