

EXTENSION DISTRICT SUMMIT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

01/12/2012

Extension district board chairs and directors were invited to participate in a one-day summit in Salina, Kansas on Wednesday, December 7, 2011. The purpose of the summit was for those participating to respond to a series of questions that could lead to a better understanding of how districts were functioning and lessons learned in the process of organizing districts. Participants included board chairs and directors from 13 of the 14 Extension districts.

Questions Posed. Facilitated discussions were conducted in two groups, board chairs and district directors. A series of questions were posed for discussion, as follows:

- 1) Prior to becoming a district, what was the greatest concern you and others related had in forming a multi-county district?
 - Was the concern justified?
 - What could have been done to reduce the concern?
- 2) What was your greatest hope or motivation for joining a district?
 - Was that hope justified or realized by joining a district?
 - Were there unexpected consequences or outcomes of forming a district?
- 3) Has this move gone well?
 - What has not gone so well?
 - What are the challenges of working across county lines?
- 4) What has changed in programming as a result of becoming a district?
 - Please describe how Extension programming has changed.
 - How has the work of agents changed?
 - Has it changed the way you look at staffing the local offices?
 - Has it changed what you look for in hiring agents?
- 5) What do you think still needs to happen to realize the vision and improve your district?
 - What advice would you offer to county councils interested in becoming a district?
 - What advice would you offer to other districts in how they currently operate?
 - How would your district board receive a request to add a county to your district?
- 6) Do you believe you are serving clients better with the multi-county district?
- 7) What are the threats to continued success as a multi-county district?

A comprehensive set of notes from each discussion group is posted on the web, along with this summary document at:

https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/boardleadership/about-ksre/seac_home/Index.html

Outcomes in Districting. Outcomes and themes emerged with respect to what it has meant to have organized into an Extension district.

- **Unanimous agreement** (both board members and employees of districts) that the district structure is an improvement over what they had previously in the individual county council structure. When asked if they believed they were better off in this structure, the unanimous response was “yes.” When asked if they wanted to return to a county council structure, the unanimous response was “no.”
- **New programming** - Extension agents have been able to expand offerings of educational programs over what the capacity had been in a county structure previously and audience participation has improved.
- **Specialization** - Extension agents have reduced duplication of responsibilities which has allowed for specialization and greater focus and depth of expertise in responding to the interests and educational needs of clientele.
- **Expanding audience** - With specialization and new programming, Extension agents are experiencing a growth in audiences served as compared to their county-based capacity. In some examples, these audiences are totally new to Extension educational programming within the district because of the new focus and expertise of an agent in the district.
- **Financial stabilization** - The Extension district board has an improved ability to stabilize the financial resources resulting in a more efficient, effective use of resources and the resulting programming. Long-term planning can now occur and that results in greater savings, more responsiveness of emerging educational opportunities, and financial efficiencies.
- **Workforce stabilization** - Through long-term planning and resource stabilization, a greater ability to reduce uncertainties occurs such that a high performing workforce is being achieved. Some believe that the district structure in the long run will reduce workforce turnover. Some expressed pleasure in how collegial the district team of agents and staff have become.
- **Hiring to Needs** - New staffing has offered opportunity to hire for needed specialization. Opportunities are now achievable in hiring for ethnic, culture, or language diversity. New agents seem to assimilate quickly and with seemingly less effort into the district structure.
- **Improved community relations** - Improved communication and relations were noted with the county commission as compared to when in a county structure. Additionally, specialized agents are able to be more responsive to community-based issues and needs.
- **Youth experiences** - Districts have increased the opportunities for positive youth experiences through increased project opportunities, district-wide events for youth in meeting others outside their local community, and improved participation in regional/statewide events. When left to the youth, the district model is working very effectively in increasing opportunity for positive growth and learning.

Challenges to forming a district. When reflecting on issues affecting the organizing of districts in negative ways, board chairs and district directors cited:

- **Fear of loss** with this change to an Extension district. Some of those fears of loss included county identity, an agent, the 4-H program, county fair, personal contacts, friendships, and control.
- **Structural change is bad.** Boards, agents, volunteers and parents tend to anticipate any Extension structural change to be negative or have a negative result with respect to the operation of the 4-H organization and program locally. It is much easier to find people who will support the negative than to support the positive. Operation of the 4-H events and activities relating to club work is extremely varied among districts. Some districts have successfully combined certain elements and find agreement and support for the district 4-H operational model. Others have remained as a local office-based operational model. Some districts have few, if any challenges with 4-H that are different from when operating as a county-based system. Others remain tense with disagreement on the appropriate operational model for club related events and activities. Some agreement if left to the youth, problems would be resolved.
- **Concern for loss of "services"** received by going to the office. The agent that would work with you on the issue, problem, or question will not be available in that local office of the district.
- **Changes in responsibilities.** Lots of comments relate to the agents and office staff fears with changing responsibilities, loss of some things enjoyed, fear of not liking new responsibilities, or losing the network of familiar clientele. Concern that agents and office staff in another county aren't going to cooperate or are not as effective in programming and support. Personality conflicts will emerge.
- **Rivalry issues** among local communities, offices, county officials are present.
- **New taxing district.** The belief that a new taxing district results in increased taxes.

Recommendations to those interested in becoming a district.

- **Develop a plan** - staffing, programming approaches. Utilize experience with board members, agents, and staff from existing districts to help with the process.
- **Know why to district.** Know why you are doing it and what you want to have happen.
- **Communicate the vision to the public.**
 - ▶ Why making the change? Recognize need for specialization with more educated public, complex problems and issues, and greater need for focused programs.
 - ▶ How will this change improve your ability to serve the public?
 - ▶ Be upfront on 4-H and admit that some things will change, some will remain the same. Compromise, cooperation, and flexibility will be needed. Remind that 4-H is about positive youth development and that can be achieved through multiple models. Stress patience through the process. It will be alright.
 - ▶ Be sensitive to hot issues like taxing authority and belief that this results in

increased taxes.

- ▶ Build trust with county commission. Commissioners need to trust the Extension board will make decisions that will be in the interest of that county and its residents.
- **Utilize experience of others.** With 14 districts today, many capable, experienced persons both as board members and employees can provide advice and support. District board members and district directors all expressed a sincere willingness to help others in the process.
- **Be an advocate.** You must be a true advocate, convinced that in the long run this is the right thing to do. And, then you need to take the courageous steps in voicing your belief in making the change. Board members, agents, staff, and commissioners all must believe this change is right to happen and worth the journey.
- **Plan for a needs assessment.** Plan to do a needs assessment for the district in planning for the programming that could be delivered through the new staffing model in the future.

Plans for additional roll out of this information are currently fluid and still forming. Ideas are welcome. As a minimum, the following steps are planned:

- release of raw data from the series of questions
- provide a summary of key points (per the statements above)
- review with State Extension Advisory Council in their February meeting
- provide webinars for faculty and staff to discuss results
- create more opportunities to discuss through public forums
- develop marketing materials that convey facts and experiences in districts
- support existing districts in further development of program and staffing models for continued relevance

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