BELOIT, Kan. – It may have seemed like quite a leap of faith.

But for Tom Claussen and a progressive group of Mitchell County residents, forming an extension district with Lincoln County nearly 20 years ago was just “a good decision for us.”

“Even six months later I knew it was the right move because things just started falling into place and working very, very well for us,” said Claussen, who was an extension council board member at the time and recently was elected Mitchell County Commissioner.

In 1993, the Post Rock District became the first ever extension district in Kansas. Claussen remembers the move making sense because individually, each county was in tough budget times.

“We would have been broke in another year or two had we not done anything,” he said. And, “we weren’t getting increased funding from the county.

“Lincoln County was in the same situation, so we tried to form a district, be out from under the tax lid of the county commissioners, and we did that. We didn’t spend any more money than we did before; it just seemed like it was easier to levy and control our program.”

Claussen remembers a temporary bump in the levy “to take care of shortfalls that we anticipated.”

However, when one agent left, the two offices were left with three agents and two office professionals.

“Back then, one agent probably cost us about $40,000, so we saved $40,000 a year for that period of time that we operated with just three agents,” Claussen said. “That was quite a savings, and there was no reduction in programs. We offered probably better programs because our agents were more specialized and they could work on the activities that they liked to do and that they were well-acquainted with.”

In 2005, Jewell and Osborne counties joined the Post Rock district: “Initially, we would have had eight agents in those four counties, but we reduced that to six,” Claussen said. “There’s an economic advantage there, as well.”

Also this year, Smith County joined the Post Rock District on July 1, making it “seven or eight” agents for five counties.

“I think we are operating at maximum efficiency now,” Claussen said. “I’m going to hesitate to say this, but that may be as big as we care to get because when you get larger than that, I see some economies of scale.

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that don’t exactly work in your favor, particularly in geographic distance."

Claussen, though, admitted there were tough times initially, particularly from residents who feared that as its own tax entity, the district would increase the taxpayer’s bill.

“Our agents have been very, very good at holding the line on spending; it’s almost as if they’re spending their grandmother’s last penny,” he said. “We really feel like we’re good stewards of the taxpayer’s money, but we’re also hired to present a good program.”

“Plus, he says, residents have the ultimate say on the district’s operations.

“If we don’t do a good job, vote us out of office,” Claussen said. “That’s all I can say to folks; there’s an easy way to handle that. We’re all friends and neighbors (in the community) and we all get along. But if we spend money unwisely, we have to meet that taxpayer on the street sometime or another.

“The extension tax bill comes out of your tax payment as a separate line item, and you can see what you’re paying for extension. If you’re paying $5,000 or $6,000 on your property taxes, about $50 of that goes to extension. If you don’t like the way that $50 is being spent, you have a chance to vote in somebody different.”

When the district was first formed, the Post Rock District’s mill levy was 2.58. Currently, the levy is at 2.19, according to Claussen.

“It’s been a joint effort between the full time staff, the board members, the university and also our area directors. It’s been good,” he said. “At this point, I have no regrets; none whatsoever. I think we have served the people of these five counties very well, and I hope to continue to do that job.”