Strength in Numbers

Commissioner Says Counties Gained District Services, Agents

FORT SCOTT, Kan. – One of the architects of the Southwind Extension District in southeast Kansas says two years later that the decision to combine services has been a plus for local citizens.

Allen Warren, who served on the Bourbon County extension board before being elected a county commissioner in 2010, noted that residents in each of the district’s three counties essentially gained four extension agents to serve them.

“We ended up with six specialists (in the district) as opposed to two generalists working in our extension office,” Warren said. “That right there says it all for me. Our extension agents, we always felt they were good agents, and that they worked hard. But they were trying to answer every question that came at them.

“I realize that they (previously) split the responsibilities between the two, but that’s still more than what one person can be a specialist in. Having six specialists is a tremendous benefit for the Southwind District.”

The Southwind District combines the extension programs in Allen, Bourbon and Neosho counties.

“I think most extension board members (in Bourbon County) agreed with the idea of districting, but we were afraid to make that move,” Warren said. “It took a year longer than what I had hoped for, but I feel like it was the right decision for Bourbon County. From a county commissioner’s perspective, instead of having two generalists in our county extension office, we now have six specialists who can work with the people of Bourbon County. And, I think, down the road that it will save us taxpayer dollars, as well.”

As a member of the Board of Trustees for Fort Scott Community College, Warren was a founding board member of the SE Kansas Regional Educational Service Center in Greenbush, which operates in nine counties. He likens that move to extension districting.

“As districting was first talked about with the extension council in Bourbon County and the idea of working closer together for multiple counties, I went back to my previous experience with Greenbush in thinking about the benefits of combining schools where they could work closer together and benefit from economies of scale,” he said.

“That’s really what got me started to thinking that this really could be a good thing for Bourbon County.”

It’s also been good for other counties in the

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district. As part of the move, the district council was able to establish a dedicated horticulture agent for the three counties. Krista Harding, who lives in Erie, now is working to establish Master Gardeners’ programs in each county and is offering programs never before available in the three counties.

As an example, “early this spring, she brought in three different people to give presentations on gardening, planting trees and one other topic,” Warren said. “I don’t think that our local extension agents would have had the time or the focus for three weeks in a row to have a meeting held at the college for anybody from the county or district to come in and give that kind of a program.”

In its first full year, the Southwind District met its goal to offer more programs and more focus for local residents, Warren said.

“And we expect there to be still more benefits as we move forward,” Warren said.