Hiring for Needs
Citizen Groups Are Hands-On When District Hires Staff

CLAY CENTER – River Valley Extension District director John Forshee figures the people in his four-county area have a pretty good sense of the services they need from Kansas State University.

So it’s reassuring to know that when he’s hiring new agents for the district, he’ll get good help from local residents.

“The question of what we are going to specialize in [the River Valley District] and how those things are determined comes down to citizen input,” Forshee said. “It’s a multi-faceted process...but we are always going to go back to our program development committees and our 16-member elected board.”

The program development committees, or PDCs, are groups of citizens who volunteer their time to plan extension programs for the local community. They work in four areas – community development, agriculture, family and consumer sciences, and 4-H and youth – and generally are made up of six citizens per committee.

PDCs and elected boards are mandated by Kansas extension council law. Their purpose is to develop the direction for all extension programming in the state.

In recent years, River Valley district residents – who live in Clay, Cloud, Republic and Washington counties – helped form plans for more programs in nutrition, community development, horticulture, livestock and aging.

Forshee said the district responded by:

- hiring an agent whose sole responsibilities were in horticulture and community development. That agent helped increase the number of farmers markets in the area and hosted an annual workshop for local growers. He also helped communities develop local strategic plans for community growth.

- assigning the district’s responsibility for nutrition programs to Gina Aurand, who is based out of the Belleville office. Aurand manages a Family Nutrition Program grant that provides nutrition education to low-income families in all four counties; and

- providing additional training to longtime Clay County agent Deanna Turner, who has

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expertise in aging issues. In 2011, Turner led a Medicare assistance program, called Senior Health Insurance Counseling for Kansans, that saved $113,575 for 491 district residents.

Forshee noted that PDC members are active in helping new agents adjust to their jobs. For instance, when the district hired a livestock agent, citizens introduced her to people and production practices in the area.

“It helped get an agent who was new to K-State Research and Extension focused on the things that were important to producers, and it has translated into programs that are having a great economic impact,” Forshee said.

He noted that getting to that point requires a commitment to teamwork between the extension district and the local community.

“One of the things we ask everyone in the planning process to do is just drop all of the typical constraints and think about the pie in the sky ideas that would be ideal for staffing and programming in the district,” he said. “Then, we work to figure out how to get those things done together.”

“I really don’t want to take away from what our programming was before, because we had some really fantastic programs in the individual counties,” Forshee said. “But in a district, there are a couple advantages: revenue stabilization has helped us plan, as agents, that if we start a program, we know we are probably going to be able to finance and support that for 2-3 years, and that’s a huge advantage for the district. And again, that specialization by agents” is an advantage.