

Recap from 2008 Department Head Conference Keynote and Panel Discussion

Introduction

Mark O'Connell, WCA Executive Director was invited to present his impressions and recommendations for working successfully in partnerships. Following his remarks, a panel discussion comprised of Dave Bretl, Walworth County Administrator; Duane Herbert, Barron County Administrator; Debbie Wopat, Columbia County Board Chair-elect; and Al Buechel, Fond du Lac County Executive shared their thoughts on extension. Notes were taken by Rick Klemme, Yvonne Horton, Donna Menart, Randy Knapp, Deb Jones, Tedi Winnett, Deb Jones, and John Preissing. This summary will share comments made by each presenter, followed by overall panel responses, and conclude with our global comments.

Mark O'Connell, WCA Executive Director Comments

- ✓ The importance of partnerships was emphasized. Extension and the counties could potentially survive without the other, but both benefit mutually by the close cooperation and joint work.

Dave Bretl, Walworth County Administrator Comments

- ✓ Walworth County Board will soon be decreasing to just 11 members. This has implications for Extension and others.
- ✓ It is important to be concise with information to the board, its committees, and the administration. There is less time and interest in pouring over material.
- ✓ Extension delayed in handling a personnel problem. Was addressed by Dick Pederson eventually. It is important to handle personnel issues promptly.
- ✓ Seek support for extension from outside the traditional extension committee.
- ✓ We consider extension a great deal, as a purchased service with a great brand.
- ✓ Retain the important values that make extension exceptional but change rules and policies to fit today, not back to 150 years ago.
- ✓ It will be important to be more self-directed and accountable as county boards shrink.

Duane Hebert, Barron County Administrator

- ✓ As counties move from Board only governance, they will have to take more of a policy making role, leaving administrative management to county executives, administrators, coordinators, and department heads.
- ✓ County government cannot simply blame the state for their budget woes. Counties must take up their problems more directly.
- ✓ Overall, more cross-training and departments sharing responsibilities is needed.
- ✓ Extension's role in prevention programs is laudable, one of the few instances where county government is out of the reactive mode.
- ✓ Extension does a great job of circling the wagons to protect self and to win the battle; meanwhile the overall budget and policy wars go on. Extension should be more aware and engaged in the larger budget and policy issues facing Wisconsin facing county government.
- ✓ Show us the concrete performance outcomes, not fluff on activities.

- ✓ Extension has fared poorly on the prioritization processes. They should try to align more directly county priorities and programs.
- ✓ Extension can help by providing benchmarking on performance and efforts taken by county government on a range of services and activities with the aim of improvement. They can help us learn from each other about what works and why.
- ✓ Called for extension to do more with benchmarking across county efforts, for more support in the future from the Local Government Center, and in helping counties plan for the future.

Debbie Wopat, Columbia County Board Chair-elect

- ✓ Ms. Wopat is a former 4-H member and leader. She now works in farming with her family.
- ✓ 4H always on top of the list for programs to support.
- ✓ More prevention programs are needed.
- ✓ Extension has not been willing to address personnel problems quickly, nor has it been flexible in staffing decisions, i.e. with a new FLP, CRD, and Ag. Some changes were made.
- ✓ Extension's Family Living Agent is now working across many departments and not in a silo.
- ✓ Extension should be careful not to fall into the third category of county programs – nice but can't be afforded.
- ✓ UWEX should continue to work on high needs issues as determined by the county.

Al Buechel Fond du Lac County Executive

- ✓ Saw Extension as a valuable component of county government. He pointed to many ways that Extension supports the community – 4-H, parenting work, agricultural programming.
- ✓ Said that 4-HYD and FL were important parts of the Health and Human Services Departmental effectiveness, by working on key issues.
- ✓ Very much appreciated the responsiveness of the staff during a recent crisis in the county – the agricultural assessments after a tornado.
- ✓ Extension staff also comes forward to volunteer for important county efforts, this is appreciated.
- ✓ County board training is an important arena where more work can be done.
- ✓ Challenged rural counties on two fronts and thought that extension was well suited to help in both – diversity and greening of counties.

Panel Responses to Questions

Communicating cost savings of prevention programs

- ✓ It can be a challenge, but evaluate programs and share often with all committees of interest.
- ✓ Share message beyond the Extension Committee.
- ✓ Develop stronger performance measures, share expected timelines and deliverables.
- ✓ Be sure to explain your worth throughout the year, not just a budget times or during vacancies.
- ✓ Can we make hard comparisons to our work and places where we are not working?

What is harshest criticism and what can we do?

- ✓ We have too many agents and educators. What do they all do? Do we really need as many agents/educators as we have? Are you the only department that can never shrink or be more efficient?
- ✓ Do you address new problems quickly enough? Are you responsive enough?
- ✓ Tenure, tenure, tenure. Not related to our work or mission. Too much time, too much energy spent on the issue.
- ✓ De-emphasize the UW part of UWEX.
- ✓ Treat your county as a customer, what do they want? Not, what do you want to deliver.
- ✓ The staff is too much in individual program silos and too much in UW and UWEX silos.
- ✓ There's too much administrative bureaucracy. Limit the amount of out of county meetings.

Recommendations to describe merits of program when vacancies occur

- ✓ When there are support staff vacancies don't refill. Look towards other efficiencies and sharing between departments.
- ✓ They loved the 133 because they are easy contracts to live with and to fulfill.
- ✓ The counties should love the short 60 days out notice with 133 contracts.
- ✓ Strengthen the contract by making the deliverables clearer.
- ✓ Why not put 133 contracts on a calendar year basis like county government does.
- ✓ Try to match your vacancies with county priorities.
- ✓ Why not simplify the 133? The counties don't need the number of signatures that are provided for.
- ✓ Recognize that it is more than the counties' 40% on salary and fringes that is needed to fund the county extension program. All the costs should be routinely described. These include county support staff, supplies and expenses, travel and computers, and even building and infrastructure.

Our Comments

- ✓ We should see where Cooperative Extension matches up with goals of county (and priorities) - tie to performance and connect with WCMA and NACO
- ✓ Some counties seek hard numbers of performance and we are criticized for not generating them.
- ✓ Smaller board sizes will increase stress for administrators. This could be an opportunity for Extension staff.
- ✓ Is being considered a valuable “purchased service” a good thing or a bad thing?
- ✓ Formal presentations are useful, but one on one interaction with county officials is important.
- ✓ Can we have a new approach to describing tenure with counties?
- ✓ Are we actually spending too much time out of county? Compared to what, for what benefit?
- ✓ Economic development related work is sought.
- ✓ Demonstrating the dollars saved from certain programs is an important key.