District Program Summit, December 7, 2011 – Extension District Director discussion notes

Introduction:

Facilitator Jeff Zacharakis asked all the agents to introduce themselves and to explain their responsibilities and those of their staff. He also explained the ground rules for the discussion.

1. Prior to becoming a district, what was the greatest concern you and others related had in forming a multi-county district?

- **A.** Wanted to know if there was a magical map that said certain counties should stick together?
- **B.** How is the district going to operate and what are its responsibilities? Felt they needed a better plan.
- **C.** Initially, agents were against districting, so the board was against it. However, the groups decided to move forward before it became a mandate.
- **D.** No one wanted 4-H programs touched. This district stall has solidly drawn 4-H lines.
- **E.** Will everyone get along?...agents, office professionals and board members. Felt that concern was justified, but added that not much could have been done to alleviate it.
- **F.** Everyone in the proposed district was on board, but they were concerned about acceptance by the community.
- **G.** Tried to increase communication with the public and keep people informed. Promoted the districting at all county fairs.
- **H.** Travel for agents was a concern.
- **I.** Distance between clients being served was a concern for programming.
- **J.** How to do programs in three counties.
- **K.** The County Fair. Will we lose our County Fair?
- **L.** Will districting affect relationships with co-workers?
- **M.** Managing others...felt like they were "winging it" sometimes.
- **N.** Miscommunication between the various boards because agents, who may have felt they were losing control, withheld information.
- **0.** Community thought consolidation meant people were losing their jobs.
- **P.** County Commissions/boards feared this was the first step to government consolidation.
- **Q.** Staffing. Can people work together and get along?
- **R.** Are we developing a new tax entity?
- **S.** Parents often caused problems because they wanted Extension, especially 4-H, to be like it was when they were growing up.
- **T.** How will public perceive it when they can't get an immediate answer from an agent? However, specialization within the districts is helping people get the "right" answer.
- **U.** Change is difficult...it creates an insecurity.
- **V.** Fear of failure on the part of district leaders and commissions.

- **W.** How do you identify with new customers and know whether they are satisfied? How do we know districting is working?
- **X.** Can an agent covering multiple counties know consumers/clients well enough in all counties to answer their questions as well as an agent in a single county?
- Y. Do you lose familiarity with people in the district?

1-A: Are you better off today than before?

Group gave a resounding Yes.

- **1-B:** Jeff suggests a satisfaction survey be conducted in districts. Jim suggested it needs to be done in all counties.
- **1-C:** People will begin to learn who the specialists are. The group felt they were able to cover more Extension areas through districting.
- **1-D:** Some suggested that Extension needs to do a better job of reaching its Spanish audience, but said there seems to be resistance.

2. What was your greatest hope or motivation for joining a district?

- A. Providing better educational programs.
- B Being willing to change.
- C. Financial stabilization.
- D. Program stabilization and growth.
- E. Longterm personnel stabilization.
- F. Being able to serve all the people.
- G. That they were creating a strong Extension presence forever.
- H. Competent and complete programming can reach more people.
- I. Gaining a larger audience for programs.
- I. New audiences...introducing people to new programs.
- K. Sustainable, valuable, relevent programming
- L. Providing programming taxpayers deserve.
- M. An improved relationship with county commissioners.

2-A: Unexpected consequences or Outcomes...

- A. They miss having their annual meeting. Felt it was a good way to spread the word about what they were doing.
- B. How quickly 4-H was merged and how well it was received.
- C. Got to go to other counties, meet new people and make new friends.
- D. It was a challenge to get agents to meet the needs of the entire district, not just their original county.
- E. More open to sharing things across county lines.
- F. Board meetings are more complicated. More challenging to manage.
- G. How quickly clients accepted the views of new staff.

- H. Never thought communication and teamwork among a staff could be so challenging.
- I. Having a scattered staff makes it hard to bond as a staff.

3. Has this move gone well?

- A. Everyone agrees districting has gone relatively well.
- B. All experienced growing pains.
- C. The interworkings of expansion is easier. Existing policies make it easier.
- D. Expanded programming.
- E. Program enhancement.
- F. Saving money...insurance, supplies.
- G. Support from taxpayers.

3-A: What has not gone so well?

- A. Getting all agents to buy into the fact that they are serving the entire district.
- B. Some program ownership issues...territorialism.
- C. Giving up longstanding programs to another agent...ownership.
- D. Working across county lines.
- E. Not all agents are specializing in one area.
- F. Communication between staff and offices.
- G. Board members are more concerned with their county.
- H. Struggle internally with being district agents...not everyone is on board.
- I. Non-fulltime directors have limited supervisory roles in personnel matters.
- J. Need guidance on what the role of a district director is.
- K. Need to push agents to reach all audiences.
- L. One county operates on its own rules, especially for the fair and 4-H.
- M. Having a husband/wife team in the same district didn't work well.
- N. Need a clear cut definition of what an agent's job is.
- O. Need to define what communication is. Agents often use that as an excuse not to do their job.
- P. One district lost two agents because of districting.

4. What has changed in programming as a result of becoming a district?

- A. More joint programming, newsletters, hired a 4-H assistant, combined 4-H. Before, agents were more generalists, now they are specialists.
- B. Added a new agent. Combining some 4-H activities. Will combine Club Days.
- C. FACs area has changed the most. Districts need a fulltime 4-H agent.
- D. Expanded programs and now offer a wider selection of programs to a wider audience. Now offering programs to a district, rather than a single county.
- E. Delivering programs twice, based on location...north/south, east/west.
- F. New hires will be more specialized regarding knowledge and skills.

- G. Communication: more specialized tasks for agents and office professionals, professional newsletters. We use the word "team"
- H. More in-depth programming. Work of agents has changed. Will continue to change.
- I. A lot of diagonal programming. Need to reach smaller communities in the district.
- J. A lot of time spent on the road. Increases productivity of time.
- K. Specialized office tasks.
- L. Job descriptions have changed.
- M. Always try to hire a "good" person and then train them.
- N. 4-H area was the toughest challenge.
- O. More programs for kids.
- P. Some agents had to change more than others. Some had to change their skill sets and learn to do other programs.
- Q. Taking a more critical look at whether vacated positions need to be filled or whether another area is more important.
- R. No longer hiring generalists, now hiring specialists.
- S. More higher quality programming...Master Gardeners, SHICK, FNP, and team judging.
- T. Replacing agents could be difficult if certain agents leave because they are building such good programs.
- U. Reaching more people with programs by doing it in more locations.
- V. Larger audiences justify spending more time on a program.

5. What do you think still needs to happen to realize the vision and improve your district?

A. Add other counties.

5-A: What advice would you offer to county councils interested in becoming a district?

- A. Plan, plan, plan. Accept that change will occur.
- B. Make sure program is in order before you ask to join.
- C. Be prepared to change.
- D. Be a good observer, learning from other agents and districts.
- E. Focus on the positives of forming the district.
- F. Plan, organize and communicate.
- G. Make the change; don't delay. It only gets harder.
- H. Think longterm.
- I. Speak up if you don't agree with the plan.
- I. Be honest. Realize things are going to change.
- K. Leave the past in the dust. Let the rain settle and change with a plan in mind.

A second set of notes from the same discussion. Much is duplicate, but written by a different scribe.

1) Greatest Concerns prior to becoming a district

Is there a magical map that certain counties should fit together and was there a power play by area directors to force certain counties to join together.

As we have expanded, how will it operate and how will agent responsibilities evolve? Have operated without a plan – just done it and then reacted.

Were afraid that if they didn't do it, it would be done to them. But greatest concern was what would happen to the 4-H program and resistance to change.

Will everybody get along – agents, office professionals, and board members.

Was hired in the district, but when looking at expansion, concerns are personalities of other agents and issues related to combining 4-H programs.

The stars were aligned with support of agents, boards and commissioners, but were concerned about how they would be accepted by patrons and the fear of the unknown. Were concerns justified – no.

Travel was a concern across three counties. Was worried how as an agent would be programming across the district. Also were concerned about potential changes in the 4-H program. It has been an evolving process and still evolving. Combining club days created a lot of hard feelings.

Biggest concern we heard was about losing county fairs, but personally it was the changing relationships with the agents. No courses in how to be a good director so sometimes feel like you are winging it.

Agents met but because of resistance from some agents, the boards were getting different information. So some agents were fearful of losing control and perhaps told the board what they thought the Board wanted to hear and not what they needed to hear. Also some agents were fearful they would lose their job.

Agents were ready but the Board was not. Board feared changes to the 4-H program and thought districts were the first step in consolidation of county government. They didn't want to drive to a neighboring county to get their services. Commissioners in one county were fearful of losing funding control and fed the fears about consolidation, while the commissioners in the other county were ready. Also there was fear that a neighboring agent would be difficult to work with. Decided that you didn't have to love someone to work with them and if

someone was too difficult they would deal with that. Some board members became very persistent in pressing county commissioners to support. They finally approved, but are still negative and complain openly about the district forming.

Concerns were the big rich county would pay the bills for the small poor county and with only four board members, the small poor county would take advantage of that. Newspaper editorialized against the district with 13 negative articles/editorials during the process. They were concerned about a new taxing entity. The quality of the agents and programs was strong enough to overcome negativity of the press. Later, when the next door county wanted to join that was not ready the first time, the District board was not willing to expand because of concerns about 4-H issues and not wanting to make the necessary changes in programming. If they would have come on in the beginning, they would have worked through the issues together and all three counties would be in the district.

Initial goals were to save money, but realized that they couldn't and accomplish programming objectives. There were concerns about not having access to "their" county agent. That concern was unjustified because specialized agents have proven their worth.

Agents were use to being generalists and some did not want to lose being that goto person, or fearful of having to specialized – they were insecure. Fear of failure was a concern.

How do you identify with new customer and how do you measure customer satisfaction? People that want to use Extension will learn who the go to person is and will utilize them in a district.

2) Greatest hope or motivation?

Providing better programs for clientele.

Financial stabilization and assurance that Extension would be there in the future

Constant turnover before district and wanted to be able to retain personnel

Ability to provide cutting edge programs into the future

Ability to serve all the people. If you don't have enough staff you can't have a comprehensive program.

Be able to have a strong Extension program into the future.

Have a lot larger audience now so can reach more people.

New audiences, greater awarenesss of public for Extension

Provide programming that public deserves.

In-depth programming.

Unexpected consequence -

Have an improved relationship with commissioners.

Miss the annual meeting because we have to find other ways to tell our story.

Merging of 4-H programs went much better than expected

Really enjoyed ability to meet and serve new people across the district.

Some agents not all as willing to expand programming across district

Now more open to share programming with neighboring districts. As a county board weren't as willing to share.

Larger board is more difficult to manage when 16 members instead of 9 members.

Amazed at how quick clientele accepted new staff.

I never thought communication would be such a challenge with more offices and people.

3) Has the move gone well?

Every time we expand it has gotten easier to deal with staff and programming issues. But, getting all agents to buy into the concept of serving the district has not gone so well.

I think it is going well. We have expanded programming. There are some program ownership issues by some individuals and giving things up is sometimes a problem

New district but things are going well. Still learning how to program across district lines.

Still need to work on communication issues – agents need to help public see them as a district agent. Also, sometimes board does not have the vision for district programming.

Have found financial efficiencies and things are going well.

Communication between staff members and offices is a challenge. Some board members seem to be more concerned about their own county and not entire district.

Transition has been smooth and taxpayers are very supportive. Challenge is getting all agents to see themselves and program as a district agent.

Not all agents on board with programming across county lines. District directors in districts without the supervisory role makes it more difficult to get agents to work differently.

Challenge is getting people to work across the county lines. If a county has not had a program, they don't know what it is they are missing or can have. We have to find opportunities to help public get to know who the agents are and what they can do.

One county tries to dominate issues related to 4-H and county fair. When things get difficult we have a tendency to want to go back to what was comfortable. We have to resist this.

4-H agent failed because there were not clear, realistic and accepted expectations for their responsibilities.

It is hard to be a team across multiple offices in the district.

We lost two good agents during the process, but new agents are really invested and working well within the district. We do not have the county line issues. People are use to traveling.

4) What has changed in programming as a result of becoming a district?

Combined programs into district concept, hired 4-H program assistant and FNP assistant. Doing joint programming where it has not been able to specialize as much as we could with larger district staff. One agent takes lead for District FNP program. Teamwork is going well but we need to expand so we can specialize more. Plan was to join 4-H program first and hire a program assistant and next to combine and expand FNP program.

Will be doing district club days, and utilizing youth to make decisions. Have not specialized ag agent positions yet.

Most changes have been in FCS area. Ag agents are honeymooning. Districting will allow for a full time 4-H person in each office. Will hire differently in the future to hire to specialty.

Instead of trying to have a program in every county, are holding one big program and marketing it that way. Are overcoming territorial issues. An agent has to remember it is not their county anymore.

When agents prepare a program, it is being delivering it more than once. 3 FCS agents have specialized programming well. Not traveling just to travel but for program purposes, but one county wants an ag person sitting in that office part of the time. Whole staffing issue for a district is a challenge because there are many ways to do it. Board members ask how other districts are doing it, but there is no one blueprint for staffing.

Communication has been biggest change in how agents are doing things. Have a professional newsletter and newsletter. Also hiring now for skill and not generalist.

Went into district with agent specialization plan in place. Sometimes it is small steps. District agents revert to county agents for 2 months before and 1 month after the fair so not fully specialized for programming year round.

Do a lot of diagonal programming in four counties of the district. Working to expand programs beyond county seats to other communities. Utilization of state specialists is different with specialized agents.

Specialized office professionals and transitioned some office professionals to 4-H program assistants.

Toughest challenge was in the 4-H area. But things are working much better. Kids love it but parents complain. Also have specialized office professionals. Some agents had to change more than others. Some agents were already specialized or had a passion for a particular part of the program. Hiring has changed because now we are looking for a specialist when we hire. Looking for a specialist because it may be more difficult for someone who is a generalist to make that transition.

Challenge is to program as a district as a new district. All agents have same background so need to take on a new area.

Four agents (2 FCS and 2 ANR) each have a different programming area of specialization. Consistency of programs (rules) is a reason for counties not wanting to consolidate into a district 4-H program – some don't want to follow rules.

We are offering much higher quality programs now than what was happening before. More opportunities for youth. Combined newsletter so more efficient use of time and no duplication.

Can justify spending more time developing a program knowing that you are going to deliver it multiple times.

5) What do you think still needs to happen to realize the vision and improve your district? What is advice you would offer county councils interested in districting?

Plan, plan, start now. Make sure your program is in order and be prepared to change.

Don't go in with the attitude of what needs to change for you to join our district. We will say no.

Be a good observer. Focus on the positive aspects and not worry so much about the perceived negative issues, because you learn how to work through the negative issues.

Plan, organize, communicate.

Just do it. The longer you wait, the harder it is going to be.

Think long term.

Participate in the planning process. Don't wait until after it has formed and then complain. Be honest and realize things are going to change.

Leave the past in the dust, let the rain settle it and change with a plan in mind.