Cooperative Extension: Made for hard times

By Dr. M. Ray McKinzie
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A year ago in this space, I wrote that the economy would very likely change the scope and face of government-supported programs. Well, that future is here. Change is imminent. A new UNC system president has reviewed university programs across the 17 campuses to determine which programs will be maintained and which should be discontinued.

The governor recommended hiring freezes, a reorganization that includes layoffs and merging some state agencies, and 18 percent budget cuts to the UNC system. My goal for the Cooperative Extension Program is to remain viable: to this legislature, to this governor, to this state agencies, but most of all to the people of North Carolina. Yes, times are hard, but Cooperative Extension was made for hard times.

Cooperative Extension will remain in service to our audiences. We still have work to do as long as companies continue to close, parents need help raising their children, farmers need assistance getting loans, the elderly need help choosing a Medicare plan and families still seek ways to buy homes and save money. The needs of our audiences are the work of Cooperative Extension.

We continued to serve audiences this year as we celebrated the 25th annual Small Farms Week in March. This silver anniversary gave us the opportunity to herald the accomplishments of small-scale farmers, as well as bring this segment of our audience to campus and county centers for extra educational forums, workshops and interaction with peers and leaders. Whether we are telling farmers about lettuce production in agro-forest systems, how to finance specialty crops or use computers to search for government programs, we remain in service to the people who need us.

In this age of intense scrutiny and justifiable accountability, we have to continue being accessible. The value of Cooperative Extension programs, people and services is that we are hands-on. Our agricultural implement wends its way from the farm gate to the dinner plate. We are in service and made for times just such as these.

Davidson leaders tour Surry enterprise

By John Wright
State Advisory member, North Central District

Davidson leaders sent a 22-person delegation to tour Pilot Mountain Pride, a post-harvest produce handling and aggregation center recently opened in Surry County. The purpose was to explore an agricultural enterprise that Davidson County might emulate as part of its agricultural and economic development planning.

A member of the Davidson County Cooperative Extension Advisory Leadership Council suggested the tour. Participants included Cooperative Extension agents, county commissioners and city officials from Davidson and Lexington, along with representatives from the county Planning Department, the Economic Development Council, the Agricultural Advisory Board, the Extension Advisory Leadership Council, Farmers Market Associations, Davidson Vision, and Lexington Housing and Community Development.

Surry County leaders who hosted the tour presented Pilot Mountain Pride’s operation and outlined its vision. They identified the county’s expected contributions to the economy, as area growers collaborate to market local foods from restaurants, supermarkets and institutional food providers, such as health care centers and schools. Ultimately, they noted, the consumers get the benefits of fresh, good-tasting and safe food produced with sustainable growing practices.

Funding for lunch was provided by the Davidson County Farm Bureau; the bus was provided by Davidson Vision.

CAC members contribute to Davidson success stories

By Joan Wright
State Advisory member, North Central District

Troy Coggins, director, Davidson County Center, N.C. Cooperative Extension recently reported County Advisory Council (CAC) members’ contributions to the programs reported in the county’s success stories for 2010.

For example: Sarge Bowman, CAC vice chair and member of the local Cattlemen’s Association, urged that fertilizer industry product and application claims be tested with cattle growers as well as field crop growers. In cooperation with NC State soil scientists, local agents helped cattlemen adopt practices that could save some $72,000 in one year.

Guy Bowers, another CAC member and cattle grower, took part in the development of a farm demonstration, creating larger net profit for the farm and serving as an example for other area growers.

Jennifer Hames, CAC member and County Health Department employee, collaborated with Extension on several programs designed to promote healthy living for county employees and senior citizens. With Dean and Mary Ruth Sheets, both CAC members, were instrumental in accomplishing the conversion of the Southern Railway Freight Depot into the new facility for the Lexington Farmers Market. David Armes, chairman of the Surry County board of directors and the county Tourism and Recreation Investment Program, had pushed for negotiations for the conversion. Sheets, as secretary of the Davidson County Farm Bureau, got Farm Bureau support for the project.

Rep. Howard Coble (left) touches base with William Deal (right) at the Lexington Farmers Market.

Thom Hege, CAC and voluntary agriculture district board member, has worked with Cooperative Extension and soil and water conservation district staff on Davidson County’s Farmland Preservation planning. As a registered pesticide dealer, he is a participant in pesticide application certification courses offered by Extension and the NCDACS.

Doug Pearson and Joan Wright, ALC members and Master Gardener volunteers, helped in an urban community garden project that involved local churches, Habitat for Humanity, Extension and residents of a retirement facility. The garden provided fresh produce and income for a number of low-income Thomasville residents.

Strategic planning — continued from page 1

director of development, presented an overview of the rising need for private resources supporting Extension work, examples of successful Extension foundations and the role of council members in supporting them. With current operations as a base, the team proceeded to define a vision of a highly effective State Advisory Council.

Fundamental to the vision was development of a well-organized client group with each SAC member working with a defined set of county centers and county advisory councils. A graphic image was developed that illustrated access to all communities through active county advisory councils, the interconnection of council presidents within a cluster, and the active involvement of SAC members with their county Extension directors and county presidents. SAC members would then communicate regularly within their districts and with their district Extension directors. Such cohesive operations would lead to more focused SAC member work in both regular meetings and called work sessions during the year. District directors could share key issues raised through the cluster operations and bring new needs and improvement requests to program leaders at the universities.

The team then created an action plan to move SAC toward the long range goal, including specific tasks and dates for their completion.

The final task was to review the current vision, mission, bylaws and operating procedures and to modify them to reflect the SAC vision that had just been created.

At last June’s SAC meeting, the team presented the vision, the proposed governance documents and the proposed action plan to the entire SAC membership. Final adoption was made at the fall SAC meeting.
Spotlight on Jim Parlier

My first contact with Extension was as a first-time home gardener, having soil samples analyzed to achieve the optimal additive mix to improve vegetable production. With the help of the Extension service, we produced (and consumed) beautiful and delicious broccoli and tomatoes from a previously worn out backyard garden. My wife, Joan, and I also raised feeder pigs and found a market to sell them with the help of Iredell County Extension.

In 1971, I graduated from UNC-Charlotte with a degree in Philosophy. Entering the insurance business, I contracted with the N.C. Farm Bureau in 1981, and the family and I moved to Burnsville in Yancey County in 1986. I began involved as a volunteer with the Extension service, working with Jim Ray, county Extension director, and his successor Johnny Hensley, a great promoter of Farm City Week. I have been Farm City Week Chairman since 1991. The next Yancey C.E.D., Joyce Watts, developed the Yancey Advisory Council and strengthened its members’ skills as advocates for Extension programs.

Watts and Denise Baker, interim C.E.D., helped appoint me to the State Advisory Council, with the approval of Harvey Fouts, now retired district director. I have enjoyed my involvement with the State Advisory Council, continuing to advocate for the good works of Cooperative Extension.

In 2003, I was invited by Joy Staton and her able administrative assistant Pam Dickson, now with the budget shortfall facing the state of North Carolina, the advocacy of the state leaders has become even more important to ensure continued support of Extension programs.

Extension is of vital importance to small isolated counties like Yancey. We continue to serve the people here under the leadership of C.E.D. Tres Magner and his capable staff. I am proud to be a volunteer for the organization that indeed is the extension of the universities to the people of our great state.

—Jim Parlier

Suzanne Wodek: A born volunteer

Volunteerism and gardening run in Suzanne Wodek’s family. Born and raised in Milwaukee, Wis., Suzanne credits her hard-work ethic to her father and her caring and generous nature to her Southern-born mother. The gardening gene came from both her parents and grandparents. She grew up during the depression and knew the value of growing vegetables.

After college, Suzanne began her career as an art teacher, married her husband, Terry, and then worked as an advertising executive for newspapers and magazines in the Midwest for 13 years. They moved to Connecticut when Terry was promoted to the corporate offices of Champion International. They moved to Asheboro in 1999.

Upon retirement, Suzanne applied for the Master Gardener Volunteer program for Buncombe County and was accepted from among more than 60 people applying for 24 spots. After 13 weeks of extensive learning, Extension Master Gardeners are required to volunteer 50 hours answering questions on the phone lines, with each hosting and maintaining information tables at public events or garden symposiums. Suzanne did a little of everything and volunteered 125 hours, earning the title “New Sprout” of the year.

In her second year, the many requests for gardening with kids prompted her to become co-chair of the newly formed Youth Gardening Committee. Also that year, Suzanne doubled her hours and began volunteering at the local arboretum’s youth program. The program was expanded to summer discovery camps, where Suzanne has been volunteering about 100 hours a year for the last nine years.

Suzanne was EMC Volunteer of the Year in 2004, the year her husband passed away unexpectedly. She says the compassion and friendship of her fellow EMGs were her salvation. In 2005, she received her 2,000-hour pin, and she is on track to receive the 3,000 pin in 2011.

In 2002 Suzanne began volunteering at the Botanical Gardens in Asheville and was elected to the board in 2004. She was board president from 2007-2010 and is currently vice-president. Suzanne was awarded the "Trillium Award" in 2005, as the garden's Volunteer of the Year.

Sustaining Success Through Strategic Planning

By Ralph Warren
State Advisory member, North Central District

Sustained success and continuous improvement are not accidental. Both require focus and regular attention to activity and direction.

It was with those thoughts in mind that Joy Staton assembled a strategic planning team to perform a review of State Advisory Council current operations, bylaws and operating procedures. The group was charted to develop a set of recommendations for improvement that would be presented to the State Advisory Council membership for action.

Among criteria used to form the strategic planning team: 1) it must be a small, focused group, 2) it should have representation from each of the six Extension districts and 3) it should contain a mix of SAC experience. The team members and their districts were facilitator Ralph Warren, North Central; Jim Parlier, West; Lynn Yokley, East Central; Brenda Gilbert, South Central; Jack Parker, Northeast; and Pete Miller, Southeast.

The group met in March last year in Research Triangle Park.

The group reviewed the current governance documents, including vision, mission, goals and operating procedures, as well as current SAC planning activities. The session opened with a discussion of SAC activities, such as legislative visits, back home visits, cluster meetings, district meetings and SAC member work with individual County Advisory Councils. All agreed that an area needing improvement was private resource development.

Sharon Rowland, Cooperative Extension executive (Continued on page 3)

Annual meeting showcases range of Extension resources

By Heather Lifsey
Marketing Specialist, N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services

County commissioners across the state learned just how valuable Cooperative Extension is during the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners annual meeting last August.

"Developing Leaders, Inspiring Tomorrow's Leaders Today" was the theme of the conference, which featured programs such as Community Voices and 4-H Congress. Leadership programs offered by Extension at N.C. State and N.C. A&T State universities were highlighted at an educational booth, staffed by members of the State Advisory Council and coordinated by Heather Lifsey of Chowan County. Working the booth were Sylvia Churchill, Brenda Gilbert, Debbie Maye, Joanne Stevens, Jack Parker and Sybil Mitchell-Simmons.

SAC’s Debbie Maye (left) and Joanne Stevens flank Greene County Manager Dan Davenport.