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PUBLIC AFFAIRS EDUCATION FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN ALABAMA

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Alabama has been a pioneer in program planning over the past several decades. Community clubs have been used for many years to stimulate local interest in community development. Support for these activities has come mainly from civic and business groups. But until seven years ago, there had been no determined effort to tie local interest in community development to state and national programs in a formal manner—that is, through special legislation and well articulated program activities on a state-wide basis.

To tie local, state, and national interest together in a sustained effort for community development, it was necessary to use the term "community" in its broadest sense. Included were the industrial community, rural community, and business community. None was excluded. Also, the scope of program activities had to be designed to involve the power structure at all appropriate levels. In Alabama, the vehicle we selected for this job was a program entitled "Rural Resource Development."

PUBLIC AFFAIRS EDUCATION

The methodology used to get RRD under way was an intensive program in public affairs education that would develop a positive community attitude and spirit as well as vision and willingness on the part of the people to work cooperatively toward common goals. Extension used every available educational process to make people aware of the forces, both internal and external, at work in the communities. Most of these forces were economic, social, or political in nature. Examples are increase or decline in the population, loss of productive labor force, expanding and declining product and labor markets, urban expansion, government programs, changing tax revenues. These forces, Extension explained, have an impact upon the decline in community services and facilities and the need for their further development. Stimulating the interest of community leaders in changing conditions and their influence on the community has been effective in generating a total community concern for improvement.

In appearances before community, civic, and business groups and

governing bodies, Extension has been able to create awareness of problems and needs in community services and facilities. Also helpful have been community forums, radio panel discussions, and wide use of all other mass media. Progress in developing needed community services and facilities rests ultimately upon developing among citizens a genuine will to move forward. Community concern is a vital spark which Extension helps generate.

To state the problem and establish the need, Extension pointed out: (1) decline of the economic base, public institutions, and services in rural areas, (2) lack of community concern about the economic deterioration which was taking place, and (3) inadequate financial resources to effectively attack community development problems in Alabama.

Throughout Alabama, hundreds of once prosperous and thriving rural communities are literally dying. As people move out, the land often becomes idle, churches and schools are abandoned, and local businesses close. State and county governments then lose tax revenue, the entire economy suffers, and the affected areas lose people—one of their major resources for future development. The high percentage of young men and women leaving the farm and the rising average age of farm people are of particular concern.

Extension felt that rural communities of Alabama needed specialized assistance to help their people who need and want to remain in agriculture earn a satisfactory income, and to help those people who are leaving the farm find opportunities in business or industry, preferably within their local areas.

Initial steps were taken to secure public and legislative support in 1959 and 1960. During that period, the Extension Service made a reasonably thorough, but probably not statistically valid, study that had three main parts:

1. Alabama's changing economy, particularly changes occurring in agriculture and the problems resulting from them.
2. The state's resources and the opportunities to further develop them.
3. A self-analysis of Extension's organization and program to determine what Extension could do to help Alabama realize its full economic potential.

A brochure stating the need for an intensive educational program was prepared by the Extension staff. This publication told the

story of Alabama's problems and opportunities. This story was told personally by the Director of Extension to practically every county governing body in the state. This activity stimulated interest and increased financial support at the county level. In addition, it set the stage for a successful effort to obtain funds from the state legislature to support a program in Rural Resource Development.

The next step was to present the story to the Governor of Alabama and the state legislature and to receive their support. We were successful in obtaining an initial appropriation of $150,000 to begin our program of Rural Resource Development in 1961. The appropriation has continued since that time, with a slight increase being granted by the present administration.

THE RURAL RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

The methodology used to implement the program of Rural Resource Development and public affairs education was to divide the state into eight geographic subdivisions or operating units to provide an acceptable territory for each of the eight area specialists in Rural Resource Development.

We decided to make the Rural Resource Development program a team effort. We believe, first, that success in a state-wide program in Rural Resource Development depends upon cooperation among all farm, industry, education, and government groups and, second, that these groups must be united in a common effort and must work toward common objectives that will enable Alabama to realize its normal potential for economic development. To this end, the area specialists in Rural Resource Development were instructed to become servants to county and area committees involving all agencies and institutions working to improve the economic well-being of our state.

During the past five years, we have worked with community leadership at all levels. In all counties and communities, the process has been the same: (1) problem identification, (2) determination of developmental opportunities appropriate for the community effort, (3) determination of the relationship of contemplated community effort to the efforts of other development groups so that community efforts complement the efforts of others, and (4) initiation of a public affairs education program to make the community aware of sources of public and private assistance.

We presently are working with sixty-seven county committees, with about forty leaders representing each county. There are eight

district committees; each consists of one representative from each of the eight to ten counties comprising the district. On the state committee are forty-five of the state's top leaders. All committees are broadly representative of the agencies and institutions, both public and private, of the state.

SUMMARY

The Rural Resource Development and public affairs education programs have beeen responsible for substantial progress in Alabama. Many projects have been sponsored by the various committees within the framework of the Rural Resource Development program. The program has provided an excellent vehicle for taking university-wide programs to rural areas. More important is the fact that RRD has presented the state land-grant university the opportunity to relate its competencies to the needs of the people and the communities of Alabama.

Some projects or areas in which substantial progress has been made include: (1) developing new, or expanding old agricultural enterprises; (2) rural zoning; (3) obtaining new businesses and industries; (4) providing community services and facilities, such as sewage, water, and organized city and county garbage pickup services; (5) developing recreation projects; and (6) stimulating human resource development.

I first developed a very strong conviction that public affairs education was the most effective way to achieve program implementation while working as a specialist in Pennsylvania. Today, after more than a decade of experience in several administrative capacities, I am more certain than ever that a program of continuous public affairs education is absolutely necessary for successful program implementation.