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NEBRASKA'S EXTENSION PROGRAM IN STATE AND LOCAL PUBLIC FINANCE

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The problems and policy choices in state and local government finance were the main topics discussed in the major public affairs extension program of the University of Nebraska in 1961-62. The program was entitled: "Let's Talk About Nebraska Taxes." This educational activity for the citizens of the state was planned, prepared, and presented by the extension staff in agricultural economics under the leadership of the public affairs specialist. The general purpose of the program was to meet the need and desire for objective information on this important public issue as expressed by farm and nonfarm people throughout the state.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the public affairs educational program of the University of Nebraska were:

1. To provide the citizens of the state with factual information on the expenditures and revenue systems of state and local governments, on basic principles of public finance, and on the advantages and disadvantages of alternative methods of obtaining revenue for public purposes.
2. To increase citizens' awareness of their rights and responsibilities with respect to this and other public affairs issues—the importance of reaching decisions based on the best available information and then expressing their views to those having or aspiring to have public spending and taxing responsibility and authority.

PROGRAM PROCEDURES

Leader Training Workshops

The principal teaching method used in working toward these objectives was a series of fifteen two-day leader training workshops for county agents and local leaders from every county in the state. Materials for these meetings were prepared during the summer and fall of 1961. The fifteen workshops were held in January-March 1962.

The subject matter to be covered and procedures to be followed were first discussed in detail with district supervisors before they met with county agents in district program planning conferences. This re-

sulted in excellent cooperation and support from the state administrative and county extension staffs.

Program objectives and suggestions for obtaining participation by local leaders were explained to county extension chairmen and home agents in a letter signed by the state director of extension. Each county was asked to invite ten urban and rural leaders who were willing to attend a two-day training meeting and to participate in planning and conducting follow-up activities at the county or community level. County agents were encouraged to consult with their extension boards in selecting the ten participants. A special effort was made to invite state legislators to attend.

The workshops were conducted by two two-man teams of extension economists. All of the first day and part of the second were devoted to lecture-type discussions of: the role of government in our society; basic principles of public finance for analyzing spending and revenue problems and policies; criteria for evaluating taxes; characteristics and advantages and disadvantages of the property tax, general sales tax, and personal income tax. The lectures were illustrated with visual aids through the use of an overhead projector. Discussion guides or outlines of subject matter were provided to the participants to facilitate note taking and comprehension of the material. "Students" were encouraged to ask questions and to discuss additional relevant points.

The two days of intensive training concluded with a half day devoted to the small-group discussion technique. Participants were divided into self-administered discussion groups of about ten people in each group. Specialists were available as resource people but did not sit in with these groups. A set of four questions was provided to the groups as a basis for discussion. The group-discussion technique gave the workshop participants an opportunity to share views, to apply what they had learned, to get difficult points clarified, and to go through an experience in exercising their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Each group summarized and reported its discussion when the participants reassembled.

About 650 local leaders and county agents attended the fifteen workshops. Among the participants were: farmers and ranchers; bankers; retail businessmen; doctors, dentists, and lawyers; county assessors, clerks, treasurers, and board members; state legislators; college professors and school teachers; and school administrators and board members. The response was generally favorable among participants, who indicated that they regarded the program as very informative and the presentation objective.

The workshops received widespread and continual coverage from the press, with both favorable and unfavorable editorial comment. Considerable criticism of the entire activity came from one metropolitan newspaper, from some individuals and groups who felt that the university should avoid controversial issues, and from a few who argued that the university was trying to "sell" a particular viewpoint. Our evaluation of the series is that it was successful as an educational approach to a complex and controversial subject.

Other Activities

County agents were encouraged to involve the workshop participants and their extension boards in planning and carrying out follow-up activities at the county and local levels. Since more material was presented in the training meetings than could be handled conveniently in local programs, an outline of a suggested two-hour program was prepared by the specialists. Activities reported so far include: county-wide public meetings with specialist help; series of two to five local discussion meetings organized and conducted by leaders; county or community meetings with panel discussions by leaders; talks and panel discussions by agents and leaders at regular meetings of organized groups such as farmers' organizations, service clubs, home extension clubs, parent-teacher associations, etc.; and use of local press, radio, and television. Since these activities will continue through 1962 and into 1963, complete information is not available at this time on local educational efforts.

A special one-day presentation of the material prepared for the workshops was given by extension economists for the governor of Nebraska, his administrative assistants, and the state tax commissioner. A workshop was also held for the entire staff of the College of Agriculture at the University of Nebraska. Four half-hour television programs were prepared and video-taped for later telecasting over the university's educational station, KUON-TV. A Lincoln newspaper assigned a reporter to summarize the information discussed in the workshops and published these summaries as a series of articles in the daily paper and as a special reprint. A set of four extension circulars has been written by the economists involved in this program and is now in the process of being printed. These will be available for general distribution and as a basis for home extension study lessons.

RESULTS EXPECTED

The immediate result of these educational activities was widespread interest in and discussion of Nebraska's state and local government finance problems and possible solutions, especially sources of revenue.

One newspaper editor told the project leader that, in his opinion, the people of Nebraska had received more information on this public affairs issue during the first three months of 1962 than in the state's entire history. Continued formal and informal discussion is expected at both the state and local levels. The leaders trained in the workshops provide a core of well-informed citizens in every county of the state; they continue to be actively involved in discussion. Several candidates for the state legislature have asked for information by letter and in personal visits with extension specialists.

The full impact of this educational effort in public affairs by the University of Nebraska will not be known for some time, perhaps several years. Proposals for changes in Nebraska's tax system are certain to be introduced and discussed at considerable length in the 1963 session of the state legislature. Action or lack of action by that body will depend upon the views and desires of the citizens of Nebraska as expressed through the political process.