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THE PUBLIC AFFAIRS APPROACH TO COUNTY AND AREA DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

*John O. Dunbar, Extension Economist
Purdue University*

The Problem—How to Identify and Select Public Problems for Extension Education Programs

Rapid progress has resulted in vastly increased demand for community development and public affairs extension activities in recent years. Low farm incomes, the communist threat, rapid movement of people out of low income and resource areas, and rapid growth of population in some areas have created public problems.

County extension workers, under pressure to expand youth and family living programs and conduct educational programs in the more complex technology and management of modern agriculture ask, "How do we decide on what to work?" Community development and public affairs specialists, too, are confronted with a wide array of requests for service.

In the past, decisions concerning problems on which to work have been made by either:

1. State directors and/or district directors who decide what the program ought to be, then coordinate the work of specialists and county personnel.
2. The county agent, following informal conferences with specialists and local people whose judgment he respects.
3. Specialists, who then use various devices for getting their program accepted by county agents, merchandise their program through other groups, or present it through mass media.
4. Local extension committees which either act upon recommendation of subcommittees or take a poll of the whole committee to decide what to put into the program.

This situation has resulted in at best a fragmented program and a great deal of service work for various groups done at the expense of time which could have been used for educational programs. An educational program based upon the real needs and desires of the people has been difficult to develop.

An Alternative Method—The Public Affairs Approach to County and Area Development Programs

The purpose of this program is to maximize the income and satisfactions of the people in the area. This approach involves:

1. Organize a county development committee of 10 to 15 members (the selection of the members in such a committee is an extremely important phase of this activity). The county development committee should devote its efforts to the over-all development of the county. It should neither become engaged in carrying out the actions it may suggest nor limit itself to activities which might be carried out by extension.
2. The county development committee needs to go through the following procedure in developing its plans:
 - a. Inventory and appraise the current situation in the county, the trends taking place in the county, and what these trends will make the county like at some definite future date.
 - b. Appraise the trends and forces outside the county which have a bearing on the development of the county.
 - c. For some given date in the future, the committee should determine the kind of a county it wants from both the standpoint of income and satisfactory living. This may be accomplished by the following steps:
 - (1) Consideration of the various alternatives for arriving at the highest possible income. This involves determining the number of people that can be employed at satisfactory incomes in agriculture and in the nonfarm sector. It will also show how many people need to leave or can be brought into the county during some future period.
 - (2) After the income phase is analyzed, the institutions for providing the most satisfying life should be considered for the future date which has been selected. It should include the following:
 - (a) Transportation facilities
 - (b) Health facilities
 - (c) Educational facilities
 - (d) Social, cultural, and religious facilities
 - (e) Other

- d. After setting up the goals for the county for some given period, the next step is to determine the problems in getting from the present situation to the desired one. This is the point at which the major problems of the county are identified. These problems should be stated in terms of achieving specific results.
 - e. The development committee should then select the problems on which action should first be initiated.
3. After the county development committee has selected problems on which action should be initiated, it may request action by an already existing agency or create a new agency to carry out its program. This committee does not actually carry out the program. It may also request that the extension service develop a public affairs educational program to assist the people of the county or area in evaluating the problem or selecting the best alternative way to solve it.

Effects of the New Alternative

This process gives the county extension committee, which represents all the people, a definite recommendation concerning problems on which educational programs should be conducted. It provides an improved basis for problem selection by county extension committees, county extension personnel, community development and public affairs specialists, district supervisors, and the director of extension and serves as a guide for the development of educational materials and the holding of meetings to solve problems on a priority basis. Extension can thus carry out its appropriate activities in the solution of public problems.

Extension agents and specialists in community development and public affairs can carry out educational activities with community development and public affairs committees themselves. This will provide them with improved information on which to base decisions, further adding to the effectiveness of the over-all extension effort.