

February 12, 2015

Dear Flathead County Extension Stakeholders,

Attached is the synthesized outcome of our most recent formal assessment of Flathead county needs.

Effective Extension education is based in the principle of improving people's lives by addressing locally-identified opportunities and challenges with resources of the land-grant university system. Fundamental to this effort is a process of assessing current program progress and identifying emerging opportunities.

On behalf of our Flathead County Extension team, it is our pleasure to present this report to you. This very useful tool will help our Flathead County Extension program to become even stronger for the people of Montana.

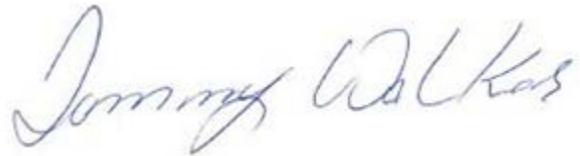
If you have any questions about this report, or any other Extension topic, please feel free to contact our office.

Thank you all for your continued encouragement and support.

Warmest regards,



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Flathead County Programmatic Assessment

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Effective Extension education is based in the principle of improving people's lives by addressing locally-identified opportunities and challenges with resources of the land-grant university system. Fundamental to this effort is a process of assessing current program progress and identifying emerging opportunities. Dynamic and fluid characteristics of a situation or needs assessment assures that Montana State University (MSU) Extension achieves community engagement and educational efforts which result in timely and valued impacts.

Montana State University Extension faculty in Flathead County requested external peer faculty to conduct a focused and inclusive assessment for current and emerging Flathead County Extension educational efforts to enhance community engagement. The purpose of this assessment is to recognize effective Extension programs in Flathead County, identify strategies to enhance current efforts and explore new opportunities for community engagement.

Six MSU Extension faculty from five counties and the Montana Center for 4-H Youth Development conducted an intense, two-day effort to interact with a broad spectrum of Flathead County community interests. Information was gathered in a variety of formats including a computer-based public needs assessment survey, individual interviews, facilitated town hall meetings, a focus group, and informal conversations with interested individuals. The six faculty aggregated the information and synthesized this report addressing successful Extension programs in Flathead County, potential strategies to enhance current efforts, and identified new opportunities for Extension faculty in Flathead County to expand community engagement.

MSU Extension in Flathead County provides educational programs in two broadly defined disciplines of 4-H Youth Development and Agriculture and Natural Resources. This assessment addresses programming within each of the broad discipline areas.

Community Considerations

Flathead County has experienced rapid population growth since 2000 and according to U.S. Census figures, the current population is above 93,000. Most population growth has occurred in the incorporated cities of Columbia Falls, Kalispell, and Whitefish. Rapid population growth outside of traditional agricultural interests is an important consideration for Extension program planning and implementation. Census figures show that there are over 1,000 farms in Flathead County with a median farm size of 40 acres. Average farm size and number of farms has declined while county population has increased significantly. Total value of commodities produced on Flathead County farms averages less than \$37,000 per farm. Primary contributors to Flathead County economic activity are medical services, professional services, retail industry, accommodation and food services, and construction.

MSU Extension programming in Flathead County is engaged with a rapidly growing community that is increasingly urban/suburban/small acreage and is primarily supported by service-based industries. This is unique among many Montana counties that remain mostly rural in population with greater economic contribution by traditional agricultural sources. It is expected that Flathead County Extension programs are unique among Montana counties and are engaged with a dynamic and rapidly changing community.

A strong desire was expressed by those interviewed to initiate Extension Family and Consumer Sciences programming in Flathead County. Community contributions from both 4-H Youth Development and Agriculture and Natural Resource programs were noted, and that the office does not currently have the human or time resources available to provide Family and Consumer Sciences programs.



4-H Youth Development

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Commendations

Montana State University Extension Flathead County 4-H Youth Development faculty and programs were specifically recognized for active engagement with youth and adult volunteers. At Town Hall Meetings, specific mention was made of member and adult volunteer growth experienced as a result of participation in the annual camp at Loon Lake. Additionally, “The 4-H Office is great! They help me with my 4-H questions and are always there to lend a hand. I get all my questions answered and they’re super friendly,” is a quote from a respondent of the Public Needs Assessment tool, and reflects many similar comments.



Concerns

Continued success of 4-H Youth Development programming is dependent upon active and fruitful collaboration of MSU Extension faculty, adult volunteers, parents, members and community supporters. Currently, primary adult engagement is centered on the Flathead County 4-H Foundation and the 4-H Agriculture Committee. Typically, foundations function as an entity to encourage current and recruit new funding sources in support of a specific effort. However, the Flathead County 4-H Foundation appears to pursue an expanded role of advising faculty on matters of program planning, administration and community engagement. This is an unusual role for a foundation.



An alternative structure for 4-H Youth Development programs would be formation of a Flathead County 4-H Council. The role of a 4-H Council is to work with faculty to identify opportunities for positive program impacts, provide a conduit for expanded community engagement, and enhance active communication for all program participants. Councils by their nature perform an advisory function, as administration of 4-H Youth Development programming rests with MSU.

Active communication is critical to effective community engagement. A program that includes over 700 youth and adult volunteers requires that communication is clear, concise, and inclusive. Active listening is the most critical component of active communication, and challenges were noted among several community members for this assessment. It appears that improved active listening with a design



to produce mutually-identified positive program impacts would be beneficial. Transparency in relationships among faculty, adult volunteers and members is another important consideration for effective communication.

Transparency provides clarity and continuity for programmatic activities addressing mutually-identified desired positive impacts. An engaged 4-H Council could provide an effective and dynamic vehicle to facilitate active listening and transparency resulting in effective active communication.

Agriculture and Natural Resources

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Commendations

Inputs throughout the review recognized MSU Extension Flathead County agricultural programming for contributions to Flathead cherry growers and to aspiring wine grape and hops growers. Additionally, over 300 Flathead County horticulture enthusiasts have completed the Master Gardener Program since 2008. Many responses to the Public Needs Assessment Survey specifically noted the value and positive impacts realized as a result of Master Gardener participation. Another valued service provided by Flathead County MSUE faculty is inspecting forage for compliance with the Montana Noxious Weed Seed Free Forage program. Forage inspection is a valued service and expands marketing opportunities for Flathead County forage producers.

Concerns

Positive Extension education impacts result from a balance of learning, discovery and engagement. A portion of that balance includes service endeavors that build community relationships and enhance learning and discovery opportunities.

Reviewing faculty interactions with Agriculture and Natural Resources program participants indicated that often service activities, including inspecting forage for noxious weeds, did not transition to educational opportunities. Many forage and grain growers rely on industry representatives or the Northwest Agricultural Research Center for education and farm-specific information. This may be an artifact of Flathead County residents adjusting to lack of an Agriculture and Natural Resources Agent for a number of years.

Flathead County has more landowners with parcels under 100 acres than any other county in Montana. In addition to the Master Gardener program, many opportunities are emerging to actively engage landowners who are not part of the traditional agricultural community.



Recommendations

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4-H Youth Development

- Improve communication through a concerted effort to practice active listening and create an environment of open idea exchange.
- Increase transparency of program administration to improve continuity and clarity of decision-making processes.
- Form a new advisory mechanism for 4-H Youth Development, and allow the current Flathead County 4-H Foundation to function as a foundation. This could be a Flathead County 4-H Council.
- Explore non-traditional 4-H Youth Development audiences and associated delivery methods including after-school programs, school enrichment and partnering with other youth development organizations.



Agriculture and Natural Resources

- Expand service-oriented activities into opportunities for integrated education efforts balancing learning and discovery as components.
- Expand program focus to include non-traditional interests such as urban/suburban/small acreage participants.
- Anticipate needs of dynamic Flathead County demographics with a continuous assessment process.

Future Office Growth

- Explore program expansion with additional faculty to address Family and Consumer Science education.



Acknowledgement

The reviewing faculty expresses sincere appreciation for the candid and valuable contributions of Flathead County residents, and the efforts of MSU Extension faculty in Flathead County to bring this effort to fruition.

Credits

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