

Okeechobee County Extension Program Review Team Report

May 11-12, 2009

Introduction

The purpose of the Okeechobee County Extension Review was to assist the efforts of Extension to plan and deliver high quality Extension programs for the people of Okeechobee County. This review provided an opportunity to pause, reflect and consider past accomplishments, current accomplishments, organization' and delivery strategies, and needs and opportunities for the program now and in the future in Okeechobee County.

Prior to the on-site visit, the team participated in a training session that explained the purpose of county program reviews and the expected outcomes. The team received an Okeechobee County Review Booklet that included information about Extension programs in the county. The document provided background information which was helpful in understanding the environment within which the County Extension office operates, including the stakeholders, the county faculty, and their programs.

The on-site review was conducted from May 11-13, 2009 and provided an opportunity for County faculty, staff, stakeholders and representatives from the County Government to share their ideas about the Extension programs being conducted in Okeechobee County. Likewise, the review process allowed county faculty and staff the opportunity to identify both the challenges and opportunities, and the future needs of those programs to assure relevance of the Extension programs in Okeechobee County. The on-site review process included four program presentations followed by discussion with faculty, stakeholders, and support staff. The team had a very short conversation with the County Administrator who could not meet with us because of another meeting.

The Review Team Report is an external analysis of Okeechobee County Extension and its programs. It includes specific recommendation for strengthening the overall Extension unit and its educational programming efforts. Contained in the report are the strengths, needs and opportunities of this office. This will provide a starting point to developing a strategic plan for Okeechobee County Extension.

Background

Extension first came to Okeechobee County in 1918. Extension has been one of the constants of Okeechobee County since its first agent. The county has a CEO whose programming responsibilities include dairy and water quality, a beef/forage agent, a 4-H/youth agent and more recently (2003) a horticultural agent. The faculty are supported

by 3 staff (two that the County supports and one on external support monies): an administrative assistant, a 4-H program assistant and Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program Assistant (external support). The county operating budget was \$61,000 excluding salaries and fringes.

The faculty in Okeechobee are passionate, knowledgeable and seasoned professionals with 95 cumulative year's experience, 51 of them in Okeechobee County. The County Extension Office is part of the County Outreach Services Department and under the leadership of the department head, Mr. Steve Padgett. The county has a relatively new administrator with whom the County Extension Office has had little contact with. However, the faculty do have professional and personal contact with County Commissioners.

The county is changing in its demographics. The County's population of Hispanics is increasing (22%). language and perhaps cultural barriers may limit the audience that the local extension office can reach. Nineteen percent of the county residents do not use English as the primary language at home. Educational attainments of residents(25 years or older) are less than the statewide averages (only 65% percent of the population graduated from high school and only 9% have earned Bachelor's degree). Okeechobee County from 2000 to 2007 has experienced about an 8% increase in population. If not for the economic downturn it may have kept increasing.

Findings and Recommendations of the Okeechobee County Extension Program Review Team

Overall Strengths

- County Faculty and staff are well integrated into the community and community life.
- The Faculty have a strong working relationship with some clientele.
- The county faculty are committed and dedicated to Extension and its mission.
- Okeechobee County stakeholders value Extension and IFAS.
- The county Administration is supportive of Extension as are the County Commissioners
- All program areas in Okeechobee County are valued.
- Faculty are recognized as experts in their field.
- Regardless of expertise, faculty and staff are willing to find the answer for clientele.
- Strong collaboration in the office between program areas, particularly with respect to 4-H/youth development programs. There is a real sense of camaraderie and teamwork.
- Strong collaboration with outside organizations -cooperation not competition with FFA, school enrichment programs, RECs and other county offices.

- Active, loyal, vocal and committed volunteers.
- Extremely strong community support for youth education and involvement.

Overall Challenges

- Reduction in state and county budgets.
- Inadequate connectivity and network technologies available in the county.
- lack of formal advisory committees for planning and prioritizing of programs
- Inadequate facility infrastructure -quality space.
- low capacity to reach 'non-traditional' clientele
- The discovery of new ways to market successes to county citizens, opinion leaders, and county officials
- Insufficient support staff/program assistants to alleviate the current burden on county faculty, staff and volunteers as they work to meet the needs of Okeechobee County. The county stakeholders we met with identified more needs in the community than can be met by the current personnel.
- loss of institutional knowledge that will threaten the sustainability and continuity of programming. The 4 faculty in Okeechobee County represent 95 years of experience in Extension and some will be approaching retirement. The loss of these people will represent a challenge unless pro-active efforts are made to increase the likelihood of smooth transitions in the future.

Immediate and long-term Opportunities

Immediate (1-2 years):

- Establish an Overall Advisory Committee with the appropriate make-up of individuals including community leaders (not just those that utilize Extension). Train them, trust them, let them lead. They can help with facilities, budget, additional personnel, new funding sources, sustainability and visioning as to emerging issues.
- Strategize with the advisory committee how to engage more of the citizens and increase Extension's exposure and visibility within the county. This will increase the community's awareness of the educational outreach services provided and those that may be needed that are not being delivered currently because of lack of expertise and/or time and/or facilities.
- Capitalize on current outside user groups that use the Extension building to market UF-IFAS Extension programs to decision makers and potential clientele. There is a mixed perception among stakeholders we visited with about perception and visibility of Extension throughout the entire community.
- Prioritize current educational programs and examine new pro-active programming areas within the context of current programs and their area of expertise -small farms,

bio-fuels, water conservation, 'good neighbor' programs, appropriate permitting, non-traditional agricultural production (Ag 101), food safety, financial management, and nutrition as examples.

- Strategize how to engage 'non-traditional' clientele with educational programs (nights, weekends, web, pod casts, etc.).
- Find a solution for the lack of adequate access to network capabilities by coordinating with UF IFAS IT and the county.
- Strategize and develop plans to reach non-traditional and diverse audiences
- Complete the transition of the county web site to 'Solutions for Your Life' template.
- Search for new funding sources.
- Develop comprehensive accountability plans that documents change. Seek ways to market and sell successes to gain additional funding and support to expand some important programs
- Strengthen marketing (advertising) of Extension program using a variety of methods

Long-term (2-5 years):

- Explore ways to expedite the plans to build a new facility at the Agri-Civic Center.
- Implement community-based needs assessments that are on-going. All programmatic areas should be assessing needs not only of the clientele but the county in general on a regular basis.
- Expand Spanish translation of materials and bi-lingual programs
- Expanded staff and county agents to deliver programs not being currently delivered particularly in the areas of 4-H/youth programs and family and consumer science programs, i.e., financial management, parenting, nutrition, healthy lifestyles as examples. These programs are vital to the sustainability of the continued quality of life in Okeechobee County.

Overall External Threats

- Uncertain state and local economics and continuing deterioration of economic conditions.
- Lack of public transportation system.
- Continued deterioration of housing market.
- Changing land-uses in the county particularly with agricultural lands being sold for development of small acreage tracts with houses.
- Growing population of new residents that are not as familiar with Extension's programs.

- Current perception of Extension as 'that is just agricultural' while other valuable programs are and should be delivered.

Agricultural Programs -Livestock (Beef/Forage, Dairy) and Water Quality

Strengths:

- Good relationship with livestock producers and associated industries.
- Multi-generational operations that are familiar and supportive of IFAS and Extension.
- Ongoing cooperation with NRCS, SFWMD, DACS, DEP, regulatory agencies that provide funding for programs and in the form of cost share to producers.
- Effective use of local producers as teachers and resources -using them to teach others through on-farm demonstrations,
- Strong commitment to 4-H and youth programs.
- Robust relationship with South Florida Beef/Forage Group where interactions are commendable and well integrated.
- Strong relationship with a number of producers who rely on the extension expertise available in the county and through Extension specialist.
- Effective consultations with regulatory agencies that are coming to Extension to consult on the BMPs and what does and doesn't work on-farm.
- Effective delivery of programming including on-farm demonstrations.
- Strong collaboration and cooperation with Extension Specialists.
- Successful cooperation with local dairy facilities who have upgraded their facilities to improve management.

Recommendations:

- Establish an advisory committee that is properly trained, Work with them to design, develop and implement pro-active educational programs for large and small scale producers,
- Conduct a needs assessment and develop educational programs for new producers (small farms, Pasture Mgt., Animal Husbandry 101, Marketing, What to do With My Land, Regulations and Permitting)
- Explore 'Good Neighbor' educational programs that assist longtime producers and new small producers cope with one another and their practices.
- Develop educational programs on all aspect of Best Management Practices (BMPs) and their implementation
- Explore programs for Agri-tourism programs.
- Explore and develop education for pasture management including appropriately and timely sampling for recommendations

- Continue collaborative demonstrations with specialists for improved management strategies
- Examine alternatives and bio-fuel educational programs for potential development and delivery
- Investigate whether All Hazards Disaster Preparedness programs is appropriate for county

Horticulture Program

Strengths:

- Effective cross county collaboration in pesticide testing and Master Gardener programs
- Good collaboration with RECs -relationship is commendable.
- Recognition of county faculty in charge of the Master Gardener Program C1nd FYN program as an innovator and skilled educator at the state, regional and national levels (web site)
- Strong IT skills
- Effective horticulture program are offered-FYN, MG, pesticide training
- Good Integration of community and businesses in the FYN program
- Good support for program from stakeholders
- Effective marking of available programs through weekly columns, radio, and horticultural clubs
- Excellent collaboration with FFA in vegetable programs.
- Broad distribution of Newsletter (or quasi -newsletter) to schools

Recommendations:

- Establish an advisory committee that is properly trained. Work with them to design, develop and implement pro-active educational programs and marketing strategies of the programs.
- Form a strategy to expand Florida Friendly Landscape programs and Master Gardener Programs.
- Develop a plan to engage more youth in horticultural programs in addition to the FFA curricula
- Develop gardening programs that include new and lifestyle residents
- Develop, with other counties, educational programs that address healthy lifestyles and nutrition along with vegetable gardens
- Expand program to ornamental production industry and landscape industries that need educational programs for Hispanic workers
- Explore possibilities of a local farmers market and community gardens.

- Explore opportunities for increased marketing of program -advertising. Although the programs are marketed through use of the radio and local newspaper, it does not appear to be hitting its mark. Other methods may need to be utilized.
- Expand training in BMPs for the Green Industries to assist county administrators in the development of local ordinances that meet the requirements of the new state law.
- Explore feasibility of a formal newsletter and newspaper columns
- Develop plans for proactive programming
- Explore development of promotional materials that can be distributed by current stakeholders to increase visibility of programs.

4-H/Youth Development

Strengths:

- Strong community support. 4-H has an excellent reputation in the community
- Strong participation of youth which indicates enthusiasm for the youth program. 4-H is used as social network
- Strong parental involvement
- Competent volunteers
- Strong school enrichment program and support from school
- Strong extramural support. Demonstrated ability to secure funding.
- Strong cooperation with FFA -collaboration not competition
- Effective training of volunteers -opportunities provided to volunteers
- Adequate evaluation of programs
- Effective use of a variety of teaching methods
- Effective leadership training to youth
- Good participation of Local banks in livestock project to facilitate youth involvement and opportunities.

Recommendations:

- Establish an advisory committee that is well trained. Work with them to develop a strategic plan that will allow 4H to expand into new areas, but with a plan for managed growth that includes adequate staff support (including new hires).
- Develop a strategy for leveraging current resources to support the development of new resources and the expansion of faculty/staff support. Existing faculty/staff are doing too much.

- Continue the recruitment of non-traditional and minority participants with the help of UF/IFAS specialists
- Develop strategies to engage more youth in horticulture projects
- Explore possible work with at-risk youth
- Expand leadership training of volunteers -there needs to be a concerted effort to start a middle managers program. Train them and let them lead and help. In addition, reporting and enrollment is currently being done by the program assistant. This should be done by leaders.
- Explore possibilities to 'open the program up' to more than livestock -alternatives for some clubs. There is a perception that the only thing that happens in the club setting is livestock projects.
- Develop a strategy with advisory committee to improve/build new facility
- Develop a plan to effectively, safely, and legally transport youth to activities. There is only county van and the only people who can drive are county faculty due to liability issues

Other Considerations

Although Okeechobee County Extension has a talented, dedicated and committed faculty, it needs to start planning for the future. The County Extension Office needs to explore ways with the county administration and the advisory committee to implement a strategic planning session for visioning and determine the needs of Okeechobee County. This will determine how Extension will implement educational programs to meet the needs and emerging issues in Okeechobee County for generations to come.

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