

Responding to Challenges Facing Rural Governments

“Working Effectively with Local Governments”

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Summary

Introduction

Land grant universities have a long and distinguished history of working with rural communities and the agricultural sector. The direct provision of educational and technical assistance to rural governments could be described as a “patchwork quilt” as one looks across the land grant university spectrum in the U.S. There appears to be a distinct lack of uniformity in Extension capacity, interest, support, and programming to serving the needs of local governments.

While extension systems have generally engaged in the support of rural development efforts ranging from leadership development to rural economic development and workforce development, especially in periods of federal supplemental funding, such as Title V Rural Development Funding (1970s), such cannot be said for a sustained effort in local government education. While the focus of paper is on serving the needs of rural governments, the points to be made are applicable to suburban and urban governments. Experience has shown that while the scope and complexity of problems may differ among rural versus urban governments, both share a common set of issues such as financial stability, boundary adjustment, revenue diversification, government leadership capacity, matching supply of services with the demands of residents, infrastructure development and renewal, and land use.

Local Governments as a Priority Audience

The health of rural communities is in part linked to an effective local governance system. Local governments can be viewed as either enhancing rural life or serving as a constraint to growth and economic stability. Granted, many factors impacting rural life are macroeconomic and beyond the control of local governments, but local communities either independently or working in collaboration with neighboring units have a significant degree of control over their destiny. Therefore to have a healthy and sustainable rural community, attention to rural governance is important. Secondly, rural governments, principally counties, provide extensive funding for carrying out the mission of the land grant university through the appropriation of funds for extension’s presence and capacity throughout the nation. In Michigan, county governments provide roughly 40 percent of the funding for the extension system, therefore serving the needs of local governments and elected/appointed officials, assists in building political capital needed for sustainability of the extension system.

Michigan Extension’s efforts at making local governments as a programming priority commenced in 1963 with the hiring of a tenured stream faculty member in the department of agricultural economics. Previous programming efforts with rural governments was, more often than not, a by-product of work with rural development and farm management. Two critical incidents occurred that gave impetus and high visibility to local government programming. The 1964 U.S. Supreme Court case of *Reynolds v. Sims*² requiring legislative districts to be apportioned on a one-person, one-vote principle provided a unique

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² *Reynolds v. Sims*, 377 US 533 (1964)

opportunity for engaging state and local governments . The second critical incident that brought both visibility and programming opportunities to extension grew out of the property tax unrest of the late 1970s and early 1980s spawned by the infamous Property 13 in California that found its way to the political agenda across the nation. The research and educational programming efforts addressing the tax revolt brought visibility to extension's ability to directly serve the needs of local and state government.

Scope of Programming

Each land grant institution has their unique program priorities or banner programs targeted to rural governments. Historically, serving the needs of county government has been the priority in Michigan that has led to expanded outreach efforts to municipal governments (cities, villages and townships). Training newly elected county officials serves as the banner program with 80 percent of newly elected county commissioners participating in the program following the November General Elections every two years. This has led to a spin-off program of training new state legislators commencing in 1996 following the adoption of term limits in Michigan. More recently, MSU Extension assumed responsibility for sponsoring and administering the Michigan Municipal Clerk certification program, a program previously housed in a non-extension unit on campus. The Clerk's Institute provides a new avenue for reaching municipal government, both rural and urban throughout the state. The principal program subject and technical assistance outreach to local governments in addition to local and state official training and certification centers on state and local taxation, intergovernmental arrangements for service delivery and service consolidation, land use education, budgeting and finance, county board chair and committee chair, state assessor certification, and dealing with the media. Training and education is a collaborative effort between the university extension and the various local government organizations.

Perhaps the two technical assistance activities that builds strong political capital for extension is financial trend analysis for local units and intergovernmental contracting and service consolidation. The financial trend analysis assistance is provided on a fee basis with many of the referrals coming from Michigan Department of Treasury Local Audit Division.

Guidelines for Serving Local Governments

Five guidelines or principles have emerged from experience in attending to the needs of local governments: institutional commitment and capacity, collaboration, quality education and training, technical followup, and local extension office support.

To be a significant player in serving local governments, **institutional commitment and capacity** (staff and resources) is a first priority. Credibility is a critical factor for local government outreach. An educational institution may gear up to address one critical public policy issue but then not be available for other emerging issues, leading local government officials to be somewhat skeptical of the commitment of higher education in attending to their needs at the local level. In Michigan, we have had many attempts by other institutions of higher learning to develop local government outreach programs but for the most part all have failed due to their lack of a county extension system and their willingness to provide technical followup. Extension must demonstrate that they are in the "game" for the long haul and not "one-program wonders". Experience becomes the teacher and local government problems the laboratory, therefore to achieve sustainability and credibility local governments and their officials have to be assured that they can count on the university being there when needed.

Linkage with state governmental institutions or organizations is critical to success. The state organizations can become your largest supporters or greatest critics. Almost every local government program offered through MSU Extension that is developed is carried out in collaboration with the county, township or municipal local official organization. The state associations are the legitimizers thus paving the way for accessing what the state organizations perceive to be "their constituent" base.

Successful engagement with local government also requires **timely educational programs and supporting materials**. The success in Michigan in reaching local officials in part can be attributed to a reliable and sustained written output of campus specialists. An MSU specialist has authored several editions of two publications that are often referred to as “bible” for township and county officials. The publications are supplemented with more specific topical writings and research related to emerging policy issues. The newly elected official training and county budgeting and finance training have been sustained since 1968 and are supplemented with specific training modules as needs emerge. Researching and publishing extension bulletins on “statewide ballot issues” has been a sustained effort since the 1970s and members of the legislature frequently utilize extension prepared materials for their constituent mailings.

Good programming is a necessary but not totally sufficient condition for successful outreach, such efforts must be accompanied by **technical followup capacity**. Without followup capacity, extension becomes just another paid or non-paid consultant in the local government world. The linking of training with followup has reinforced the university’s commitment to be in the game for the long haul.

The final guideline or recommendation for serving local governments is close working **relationship with local county extension offices**. County staff are the conduits for programming with local officials. They (local extension educators) represent the recruiters, supporters, and brokers for state and local government programming. Land grant universities provide outreach to local communities in part due to local community support of the local extension office. Specialists clientele with the exception of state conferences are a shared clientele with local county extension offices. Thus whether offering training or providing technical assistance to a local government, engaging the local extension office is critical to success. Campus specialists as a matter of practice should keep local county extension staff apprised of their contacts and work with local units since in the long run, local officials will directly contact campus specialists thus by-passing the local office once working relationships have been established.

Local government education and technical assistance is a fertile field for extension systems. Various ECOP Reports over the past four decades have reaffirmed the need to work with local governments but states still struggle in providing the needed resources to develop sustained capacity to respond to the challenges offered by local governments.