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Community Guide to Agriculture (Johnson County)

Abstract
More than 1,000 people have been reached through the various Johnson County "Guide to Agriculture" programs. Among the outreach efforts were workshops, displays, farm and farm business tours, and programs on Iowa City's public cable channel.

Keywords
Human systems, demographics and beginning farmer programs

Disciplines
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Community guide to agriculture, 1998 and 1999
(Also known as Non-farmer's guide to agriculture, 1994 to 1997)

Abstract: More than 1,000 people have been reached through the various Johnson County "Guide to Agriculture" programs. Among the outreach efforts were workshops, displays, farm and farm business tours, and programs on Iowa City's public cable channel.

Background

The Johnson County Soil and Conservation District's Non-farmer's Guide to Agriculture program began in 1994 with the mission to provide exposure to the non-farm sector on the economic, environmental, and cultural contributions of agriculture and foster urban-rural partnerships. At their December 1997 meeting, the Johnson County Soil and Water District commissioners voted to change the name for the program to Community Guide to Agriculture. Along with the new title, the group sought more diversified educational activities and audiences. The Leopold Center has funded the program since 1996.

Farm tours (182 participants)

Non-farm residents interacting with farmers on their farms appears to be a good way to carry out the project mission. But participation seemed to depend more on personal invitations to carefully targeted groups than on good media coverage of the event. Attendance at four 1996 tours was low, despite extensive publicity and reportage by local media.

In 1997, a swine facilities tour for community decision-makers had 35 attendees. More than half of those present were targeted community decision-makers, including five of nine state legislators, four of five county supervisors, the mayor of Iowa City, and members of the planning and zoning boards.

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Budget:
$5,124 for year one
$3,022 for year two
$8,605 for year three
$6,241 for year four

September 1999 Clear Creek Watershed Enhancement Forum. Part of a tour of riparian buffers, contour buffer strips, and wetland re-establishment in the watershed area.
During 1998, two farm tours were planned for school teachers as small group events that would encourage plenty of discussion. Twenty-eight teachers were shown on-farm grassed waterways, buffer strips, no-till planters, and biotech crops, and given a look at modern-day family farming.

"What's Up on the Farm?" was the 1999 tour title. The Sesquicentennial (Ed) Williams Farm was the site for comparing past, present, and future farming. The June 12 tour was attended by 25 people, who also received a packet of related materials about agriculture.

A September 1998 workshop, Living in Rural Johnson County: Sights, Sounds and Smells, drew 45 people. Once again, personal contact was motivating factor for those who attended.

In November 1999, the Community Guide to Agriculture staff conducted a special program requested by the staff involved in the Agricultural Health Study on the Oakdale Campus of the University of Iowa. The 35 attendees gave the program very high marks and many favorable comments.

Workshops (173 participants)

Three 1996 workshops drew fewer than 75 people. The group decided to seek co-sponsors, advertise, and reduce mass mailings in favor of using more targeted appeals and personal contacts in order to increase attendance.

The Chamber of Commerce cosponsored the May 1997 workshop that covered Iowa agricultural history, the Conservation Reserve Program, and how to prepare a business plan for farming in the future. Attendance was 19, most of whom came because of personal contacts made by organizers.

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Ag in-service for Iowa City schools

An Ag Fair was held for 250 Iowa City science and math teachers in March 1998. Paul Johnson, now head of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, was the keynote speaker for the day and there were 30 exhibits for the educators to examine. Three-fourths of the teachers who completed evaluation forms for the in-service program said they were likely to use the Ag Fair information presented in their own classes.

InfoVision

Four mini-programs (each under ten minutes long) on agriculture were aired during 1998 and 1999 on InfoVision, the Iowa City/Coralville cable television's Government Interactive Channel. They received 700 on-line "hits" in two years. The short features that could be selected for viewing were: Water Quality Overview, Sustainable Agriculture, Conversion of Iowa's Ecosystem, and A Con-
servation Community. In addition, InfoVision developed and aired an advertising spot to promote the Sustainable Agriculture segment.

1999 county fair (75 participants)

The interface with agriculture continued as the committee set up a group of interactive exhibits in the South Show Ring at the 1999 Johnson County 4-H Fair. The displays that allowed for the greatest amount of interaction were the most popular ones. The grain safety tug-of-war exhibit attracted the most attention, with the erosion/water quality display drawing the second highest number of participants. The committee has reserved a higher-traffic area for a display at the 2000 county fair.

Information packets distributed

Seventeen of the people who visited the Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) booth at the 1999 Johnson County Fair requested information about the Guide to Agriculture program. A packet of background information, press clippings, and other materials was provided for these people, for SWCD commissioners and assistant commissioners, for Chamber of Commerce Ag Committee members, and other interested parties.

Focus groups

Six Johnson County focus groups were conducted in 1996. Two sessions consisted of farmers, two of Iowa City and Coralville residents, and one each of small town residents and on-farm rural residents.

Farmers felt that urban residents blamed them for the area's pollution problems and that city dwellers didn't understand the financial risks involved in farming. Non-farm residents, however, made no accusations that farmers were the primary cause of the county's pollution concerns. They also indicated some awareness of the financial difficulties faced by farmers. These sessions identified a number of topics that were addressed at subsequent Guide to Agriculture sessions.

Clear Creek Watershed Project

Using much of what had been learned in the Guide to Agriculture project, the next step for several of the group organizers was to take a targeted community approach to establishing a new cooperative venture called the Clear Creek Watershed Enhancement Project. This is an urban/rural effort to create a sustainable watershed community. Through building partnerships and focusing on the watershed as a community, the project seeks to demonstrate sustainable agriculture practices and community development techniques that can be applied to other watershed areas.

The five-year development phase for the project began in 1998 with formation of a leadership team that met monthly for discussions, leading to creation of a tentative vision for the water-
September 1999 Clear Creek Watershed Forum. Farmer-board member Robert Meade shows economic decision-making procedure he used before establishing CRP buffers and riparian buffers.

In January 1999, several members of the leadership team agreed to continue the process by serving as the nucleus of an interim board for the project. The interim board met with the Community Guide for Agriculture coordinator throughout 1999. Their vision and priorities were put forth in a brochure distributed at the county fair and at a fall forum for farmland owners and operators in the watershed.

A September 1999 forum drew more than 50 people for a tour of farms that currently use conservation practices, followed by a meal and meeting to introduce the watershed enhancement project and related conservation options. The Community Guide to Agriculture group will continue to support the Clear Creek Watershed Project in 2000.

The Community Guide to Agriculture project was a catalyst for local food system work in Johnson County. Locally-grown meals were provided for the Clear Creek Watershed Project meetings. This sparked further interest in local food systems and the procurement of an Extension 21 grant to promote these systems.

Shires says, "The two years of work on this project have created a strong foundation for building the sustainable urban/rural watershed community."

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