Identifying Issues for Program Excellence

Community Forum Instructions
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![Diagram](image_url)
WHY DO WE FOCUS ON ISSUE IDENTIFICATION?

Developing educational programs based on community needs is the foundation of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension’s success. The Leadership Advisory Boards process provides an avenue to hear from all types of clientele and people within a county. Providing solutions to county problems and issues will allow AgriLife Extension to remain viable to constituents. What could be more important to AgriLife Extension than listening to its “customers” – the people of Texas?

Our ability to meet educational needs depends on knowing what local residents see as their issues that impact their lives. There is no way to know the answers to these questions unless they are asked. Therefore, Extension will involve the Leadership Advisory Boards in a process to ask residents what is important to them – the **2015 Texas Community Futures Forum**.

This activity is just one part of the needs assessment process. Other processes to collect information include, but are not limited to:

- State and National Trends
- Commodity/Industry Groups
- State and Federal Mandates
- Emerging Issues

The issues that surface should be discussed with county committees, task forces, and subject matter specialists to determine the appropriate action for educational programming. Moreover, they should be shared with other agencies and educational groups to see if a program partnership can be formed to address the issue.

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension is unique because it has faculty in every area of the state who are dedicated to educating Texans in many areas of need. This uniqueness provides an opportunity to bring together the people of Texas, other service agencies, and educational groups to help provide solutions to the problems and issues facing Texans.

Remember the mission of Extension: **“Improving the lives of people, businesses, and communities across Texas and beyond through high-quality, relevant education.”**

For more information, call the Organizational Development Unit at 979-845-7280 or go to the Organizational Development Unit’s website at [http://od.tamu.edu](http://od.tamu.edu).
OVERVIEW OF THE PROCESS

Background

The process of identifying relevant issues is fundamental to the program development model for Extension. The uniqueness that Extension offers is the involvement of local clientele in charting the course of the educational programs that Extension will offer. The involvement of a representative group of local leaders in identifying and prioritizing the critical issues that a community is facing is paramount to maintaining the relevance of our programs. While long-term strategic visioning is a core responsibility of the Leadership Advisory Board, there is also a need to involve others in identifying issues relevant to the county. The Leadership Advisory Board will remain the catalyst, but will involve others community leaders ensuring a broad perspective, representing all demographic segments of the county.

Issue Identification Forum

The Texas Community Futures Forum will be conducted in each county between December 1, 2014 and April 30, 2015.

A group of local leaders, fully described in the next section, will be identified and involved in a process to identify and prioritize issues for the county Extension program to address through educational programming. There will be issues identified that Extension is not equipped to respond to, and those will be shared with other agencies and organizations who can respond appropriately. The following process will involve a diverse and representative group of individuals who are in touch with the community and the issues that are important to its citizens.

The group involved in this process should consist of the LAB members in each county, with individuals, selected and recruited by the LAB, as well as any community member who attends as a result of publicity and an open invitation. Targeted recruitment should focus on individuals who represent:

- Different geographic locations within the county
- Local school districts
- Major industry(s) in the county/commodity groups/ag producers/business leaders
- Chambers of Commerce
- Local and county government
- Social services groups
- Medical professionals
- Grassroots organizations
- Local civic groups
• Other key leaders/stakeholders in the community
• Youth (possibly Youth Advisory Board members)

The process that will occur is broadly described as follows:

1. Opening comments from the LAB Chairperson and County Extension Agent will stress the importance of this process.

2. Participants will be divided into topical subject area groups, based upon the major area of professional or personal interest that each participant has. A minimum of 4 groups will be formed, with 6 to 10 members in each group, for issue identification. Each group will be facilitated by a LAB member, Program Area Committee Member, or other community leader selected by the LAB. The following groups are recommended:
   a. Agriculture and Natural Resources (could be more than one Ag group based on commodity areas such as crops, livestock, wildlife or horticulture)
   b. Families and Health (could be additional groups dedicated to FCS issue areas.)
   c. Youth
   d. Community Development (could be additional groups dedicated to topics such as employment, economic development, etc.)

3. A brainstorming session to identify potential issues will follow, with the facilitator capturing suggestions and posting on flip chart paper within each small group.

4. Issues will be combined and grouped where applicable. The issues then will be prioritized utilizing the nominal group technique, with each participant receiving 10 votes to select the top 3 to 6 issues that are facing the county pertaining to the particular subject.

5. These most critical issues will be re-listed on a clean flip chart page by the facilitator, and a second vote will occur. Each participant will be provided with an additional 10 dots to vote on the likelihood that the issue can be addressed. Those with the highest number of dots will be the highest priority issue with the highest likelihood of being addressed locally.

6. A General Session will follow, with each small group reporting back the issues that were identified and prioritized from each group. The report is for informational purposes, and issues will not be re-prioritized.

STEPS TO IMPLEMENT THE FORUM

PRE-FORUM

1. Meet with Leadership Advisory Board to identify key leaders from across the county to invite to the forum. This meeting should happen this Fall, and could be a “virtual” meeting conducted via teleconference or other means to get the input from members about who should be invited.
2. Develop initial list of attendees, with assignment made to each of the 4 (or more) program area groups, to determine if there are sufficient numbers in each group. Make certain that youth are involved in the appropriate group(s).

3. Set the date and time of the forum, making certain to avoid major community events that could affect attendance.

4. Secure a location that is conducive to facilitating meetings with small break-out groups.

5. Send invitations to identified participants at least 2 weeks prior to the event.

6. If your LAB chooses to include the online forum as a data collection tool, publicity should begin 2-3 weeks prior to your event.

7. Determine which LAB members and others will facilitate each of the sessions, and provide them with the Small Group Facilitator Guide in this document.

8. Meet with LAB Chair to discuss the agenda, and the role of the Chairman in facilitating the opening and closing session. Provide the Chair with the LAB Chair Guide in this document.

9. Send reminder to participants 3-5 days prior to the forum.

SUPPLIES NEEDED

- Adhesive flip charts
- Minimum of three different colored markers per break out room
- Two different colored dots – 10 per participant of each color
- Refreshments – at least coffee and water

FORUM DAY

1. Make certain room set-up is appropriate, with tables and chairs for the general session and each break out session. Each break out area should be arranged so that participants are facing each other (circle, square, rectangle) to facilitate open discussion.

2. Make sure supplies are available in adequate quantities.

3. Make a personal contact with LAB Chair and Small Group Facilitators to see if there is anything they need, or if they have any questions.

AT THE FORUM

1. Arrive at least 45 minutes to one hour early to make sure room temperature and arrangements are suitable.

2. Have name tags for each invited participant, with a colored dot or number identifying the small group that they will be assigned to. Have a LAB Member responsible for attending to the
registration table and welcoming each participant. Have blank name tags available for additional participants that may not have RSVP’d.

3. Place supplies in each small group room/location so that the facilitator will have the required materials when needed.

4. LAB Chair welcome everyone and introduce the Extension faculty that are present. All members of the LAB should be introduced and recognized during this time. LAB Chair will provide general instructions and an overview of the process.

5. Small groups will break out at this time. Facilitators will welcome each participant and provide time for brief introductions from each participant.


7. Re-convene large group with LAB Chair facilitating the reports and discussion. Thank participants for their time, and inform them of the process that Extension will undertake as a result of the issues identified. For those issues that are out of Extension’s realm, explain that they will be shared with other state agencies and organizations for appropriate action.

8. There might be a need to gather the LAB for a brief meeting to follow up on any unfinished items.

POST FORUM

1. By May 15, 2015 you should enter issues in the online database, accessible through Texas Data. The top 2 from each topical area will be considered High Priority Issues. Issues that do not fit within the realm of Extension will still be entered into the system, but designates as “Not an Extension Issue”.

2. Send thank you notes to participants for their involvement, and inform them of the action that will occur on the issues that were identified.

3. During a county staff conference, compare the High Priority Issues with the current structure of planning groups (committees, task forces, coalitions) that currently exist in the county. If there are issues that do not have an appropriate planning group to address the issues, determine plans to form either a short-term or long-term group to assist in program development for that issue.

4. For issues that DO fit with a current planning group, be sure to meet with the chair of the appropriate group prior to the next meeting to get a report of identified issues on the agenda.

5. Program plans for the 2016 program year should begin to address the High Priority Issues identified through the forum.

6. Examine the list of High Priority Issues for any that do not fit within the realm of Extension expertise. If there are partners in the county that may have expertise in that area, please share the
issue with that group. Non-Extension Issues will be aggregated on the state level and shared with appropriate agencies for their planning and staffing purposes.

SUMMARY

The end result of this comprehensive process will be a set of critical issues to guide the development of highly effective and relevant educational programs. While the County Coordinator is responsible for reporting activities of the LAB, and for entering the issues into the online database, the process described above is a **TOTAL COUNTY EFFORT!** Teamwork among county staff members is critical to the overall county program, and helps in building an engaged LAB. The steps to implement this process should be documented in staff conference minutes, and should be communicated to all members of the county staff.

All materials will be kept updated on the Organizational Development website.
OVERVIEW OF LAB CHAIR RESPONSIBILITY

Facilitating the Issue ID Forum is the most important component to the entire process. The facilitator will have expectations and responsibilities they will need to communicate and coordinate in order to implement the most successful forum possible.

LAB Chair Responsibilities

The Chair has the responsibility to set the tone for the forum. The opening comments will be critical to focusing participants on the task at hand, and keeping the issues that are identified limited to those that Extension can effectively address. Specific responsibilities include:

1. Work with Extension faculty prior to the forum to identify those individuals in the county who should be invited to participate (either in person, or in the online forum).
2. Assist with promotion and personal contacts to ensure participation from identified community leaders.
3. Make participants feel welcome at the event, let them know their opinion and their time is valued.
4. At the beginning of the forum be sure to include comments such as:
   a. “Our goal tonight is to identify issues that our Extension programs can address in Agriculture and Natural Resources, Families and Health, Youth Development and Community Development. We are looking for critical issues to improve our community, that Extension can address through educational programs.
   b. Read the Extension Mission to the participants: “improving the lives of people, businesses, and communities across Texas and beyond through high-quality, relevant education.”
   c. Introduce other members of the Leadership Advisory Board, and briefly explain the purpose of the Board. Explain that the Board is charged with helping Extension create a vision for the program, through making certain that relevant issues are being addressed.
   d. Introduce the Extension staff that are present at the forum.
   e. Explain the process that will occur in the small groups, and that specific instructions will be given by the small group facilitators. Be sure to remind them that they have been pre-assigned to a specific group, and that their name tag contains the identifier for the group they should join.
   f. Reiterate the importance of their participation, that we want them to speak up and be honest and thoughtful in their input. “They were asked to come for a reason, we need them to give us their valued opinion”.
5. Release them to their small groups, and inform them that the groups will come back together at a specific time (most likely 45 minutes to one hour from the time they are released).
6. Upon returning to the large group, inform the participants that each group will provide a brief report of the top identified issues from each program area. The Chair’s job is to keep this session flowing smoothly and keep the group reports limited to 5 minutes. There will not be a discussion or a re-vote on issues; this is for information purposes only.
7. As all groups finish, thank them for their participation in the forum. Inform them of the process that Extension will undertake to address the issues in the coming years. The issues identified will form a long-term plan for the county program.
OVERVIEW OF SMALL GROUP FACILITATOR RESPONSIBILITIES

Small group facilitators have a critical role to play in this process. The major aspects of the role to keep in mind are:

- Participation is key to success. Make it a point to receive feedback from each member of the small group; gentle nudges may be required to get that input.
- Keep the group focused on issues that are within the major program area you are responsible for.
- Keep issues focused toward those that can be addressed through education.

Some specific responsibilities for this role are:

1. Begin the session with brief introductions, introduce yourself and have each participant introduce themselves.
2. Post the question on a flip chart sheet on the wall: “**During the next 3-5 years, what are the most critical issues that are affecting this county related to __________?**” (the blank will contain the program area; Agriculture and Natural Resources, Families and Health, Youth, Community Development, etc.). In addition to posting the question, read it aloud.
3. Begin by going around the table and asking each participant to identify an issue that is important to them and their community. Capture the issues on a flip chart; be sure to leave room between them for votes to be placed. Most likely, 3-4 issues per flip chart page will be sufficient.
4. Continue going around the table until everyone has identified all issues that they wish to bring forth.
5. After all issues have been identified and recorded, begin to look for duplicates, or issues that can be combined.
6. Before combining or deleting, make sure that the individuals that identified the issues originally are in agreement with the new combined issue being written.
7. Once the issues have been combined and duplicates removed, ask if there are questions, or if clarification is needed on any particular issue.
8. Begin the voting process at this time. Each participant will be given 10 colored dots to place on the issue(s) of their choice. Explain that the 10 votes can be distributed in any way they choose. They may place all 10 on one issue, or may place one on 10 different issues or anywhere between those extremes.
9. Once all voting has concluded, count the votes on each issue and record the total on the sheet next to that issue.
10. Rewrite the issues on a clean sheet, listing the top 5 to 7 issues in priority order.
11. Next, have participants vote a second time with their other color of dots. This vote will be on the participant’s perception of the likelihood that the issue can be addressed locally.
12. On another clean sheet of paper, list those top issues with the ranking of 1.) Importance of the issue, and 2.) Likelihood of Issue being addressed locally.
13. Thank participants for the time and effort put into this process.
John Smith
123 County Road 456
Boondocks, Texas 123456

Dear Mr. Smith:

The Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service has a rich history of providing educational programs that address the most critical issues in (county name) County. In order to make sure that the programs being planned for the future are on target, we invite your participation in the Texas Community Futures Forum to be held on (date and time) at (location, address). Your opinion is highly valued in our community, so we truly hope you can join us. Our expectation is that the forum will last less than two hours, as we understand the value of your time.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the Extension office at ____________. Please RSVP to the same telephone number with your ability to join us. Thank you very much for your involvement in this forum, and we look forward to seeing you on (date of forum).

Sincerely,

Sally Jones
County Extension Agent-FCS
Texas AgriLife Extension Service

Janie Brown
Chairperson
Green County Leadership Advisory Board
SAMPLE NEWS COLUMN/NEWSLETTER STATEMENT

The Texas Community Futures Forum is being held in (county name) county to assist local Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service Agents and the Leadership Advisory Board identify the most critical issues affecting local citizens. Our local Extension program has a rich history of providing educational programs that address the most critical issues in the county, related to Agriculture and Natural Resources, Families and Health, Youth Development and Community Development. In order to make sure that the programs being planned for the future are on target, we invite your participation in the Online Issue Forum.

We invite your participation in the Texas Community Futures Forum to be held on (date and time) at (location, address). Your opinion is highly valued in our community, so we truly hope you can join us. Our expectation is that the forum will last less than two hours, as we understand the value of your time.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the Extension office at ___________. Please RSVP to the same telephone number with your ability to join us. Thank you very much for your involvement in this forum, and we look forward to seeing you on (date of forum).