

nEXT GENERATION

Since the end of 2015, Cooperative Extension – one division of the University of Wisconsin-Extension – has been working on a reorganization project to address a budget cut and enact reasonable reforms to position the organization to meet diverse programming needs throughout Wisconsin. UW-Extension Chancellor Cathy Sandeen (CS) spoke with Wisconsin Counties Association Executive Director Mark D. O’Connell (MO) about the nEXT Generation reorganization project’s progress, the important role of county feedback, and why she believes the nEXT Generation project is in good hands.

MO: How has the Cooperative Extension reorganization progressed? What can you tell us about work groups?

CS: Over the past spring, we established 19 work groups and recruited Cooperative Extension staff and county government leaders from around the state to lead and staff the work groups. The first wave of work groups convened in June to begin their work.

Work groups of up to 10 people each are focused around four areas. First, programming work groups are responsible for assessing and recommending changes to the broad program areas that Cooperative Extension delivers to the residents of Wisconsin and various ways those programs can be delivered. Program development work groups will take a look at how specific programs are planned, developed, delivered, implemented, and evaluated across the state. When we talk about “programs,” we mean classes, events, and activities like financial literacy, economic development and strategic planning, water quality, creating vibrant downtowns, and 4-H, to name a few.

Organizational structure work groups will evaluate staff and faculty positions, the structure of our organization, and how we get work done across counties, tribes, multi-county areas, regions,

other UW campuses. They will also recommend changes that will improve efficiency. Finally, the support work groups will focus on support services like technology, communications, business services, and human resources.

We received over 300 nominations for these work groups, and more than 180 Cooperative Extension staff and county partners stepped up to help us with this important initiative. Work groups will first research and report on the “current state” of activities across Cooperative Extension and then will make recommendations on how we will prioritize competing needs and how we will operate going forward.

MO: What concerns and feedback are you hearing from counties?

CS: During my summer county visits of Cooperative Extension offices, feedback at Wisconsin Associated County Extension Committees (WACEC), and discussions with county government representatives, I have learned a lot. We are hearing concerns about balancing financial and governance within multi-county areas and how to make sure staffing resources are fairly allocated between counties with different levels of resources. These concerns are valid and

will be carefully considered as work begins to explore what staffing will look like in each multi-county area. As I have said before, we know there is no one-size-fits-all model that will work for every area in Wisconsin, and county input is absolutely necessary when it comes time to determine how various positions are distributed.

Of course, counties are interested in the specifics of implementation, like staffing, roles, position descriptions, and county oversight structures. We have heard many times that this information is necessary before counties can plan for 2017 budgets. I would like to assure our partners around the state that we are doing our best to arrive at a solution that meets the needs of the county, campus, and statewide partners in a timely fashion. This process is enormously complicated, and we are grateful for their patience as we work towards a new Cooperative Extension model.

Throughout these conversations, counties have emphasized again and again the vital role of Cooperative Extension. It is good to be so appreciated.

MO: How can county partners continue to support Cooperative Extension during the nEXT Generation project?

CS: The biggest request we have of our county partners at this time is to hold 2017 county budgets stable. We realize this is a very big ask, especially with so many aspects of the project still under development. We are working tirelessly to find a solution that allows Cooperative Extension to absorb this \$3.6 million budget reduction in a way that respects county programming needs and positions us to be flexible and nimble enough to serve Wisconsin well into the future. A commitment

from county governments to maintain their investments in Cooperative Extension is key as we work towards a new delivery model for Extension programs.

I worry about additional cuts to the UW System in the next Wisconsin state budget. If this reorganization (and the reorganization of UW Colleges in 2015) have taught me anything, it is that these institutions are already efficient and responsible stewards of state and county resources. An additional budget reduction in the midst of the reorganization would be extraordinarily challenging. As I meet Cooperative Extension clients around the state, in addition to hearing about life-changing impacts from our programs, I sometimes hear surprise that Cooperative Extension is connected to the UW System. I hope county leaders and their constituents will help to communicate the connection between impactful local programs and the larger UW System.

Finally, we need counties' continued engagement and feedback. We are so grateful for your help in engaging county partners who will help shape our future direction through participation on work groups and providing other input throughout the process.

MO: What makes you the most optimistic about this process?

CS: I am optimistic about our future and the opportunity to build a highly relevant, flexible, and digitally adept version of Cooperative Extension for today and the next century. I am humbled by our staff's dedication to our institution, as well as to their communities.

Cooperative Extension has a rich, 105-year history in Wisconsin. We do not take this lightly.

nEXT Generation Project Work Groups

- 4-H Youth Development Planning
- Agriculture and Natural Resources (ANRE) Planning
- Community, Natural Resource and Economic Development Planning
- County and Tribal Organizational Structure Planning
- Family Living Programs Planning
- Organizational Structure Category
- Programming Category
- Program Development Category
- Statewide Organizational Structure Planning
- Support Category
- Administrative Technology Planning
- Business Services Work Planning
- Communications and Marketing Planning
- Cooperative Extension Academic Departments Planning
- Extramural Funding Planning
- Human Resources Planning
- Professional and Organizational Development Planning
- Strategic Resource Planning
- Volunteer Support and Development Planning

I believe this reorganization is an opportunity for us to reexamine our priorities, position ourselves to meet the needs of a changing Wisconsin, and make sure our staff are able to focus their efforts on work that aligns with their unique skills.

MO: What's next? What can you tell us about next steps?

CS: The work groups are still in the planning phase, and will work together for the next eight months to collect information and formulate recommendations on how to optimize different parts of the organization. Once each work group has come back with recommendations, we will move into an implementation phase, and dig into what staffing and investments look like around the state, and how to make them work. We do not foresee any staffing changes before February 2017.

MO: How will you be making sure county partners have up-to-date information on the *nEXT Generation* project?

CS: As work groups move forward and we anticipate having more developments to share with counties, county partners can expect regular communications. In addition to email, we will offer webinars from time to time.

I hope many of our partners will join us at the WCA Annual Conference, coming up in September in Milwaukee. We are on the agenda for a session the morning of Tuesday, September 27. That session will be a great time to learn about the latest developments. The conference will also be a great opportunity to continue to share concerns and feedback. We look forward to an open and lively discussion.

County Partner Representation

- Mark Abeles-Allison, Bayfield County Administrator – Statewide Organizational Structure Planning
- Carol Anderson, Iowa County Board of Supervisors – Program Development Category Planning
- Colleen Bates, Eau Claire County Board of Supervisors – Communication and Marketing Planning
- Dave Bretl, Walworth County Administrator – County and Tribal Organizational Structure Planning
- Betty Grotophorst, Green County Board of Supervisors – Family Living Programs Planning
- Bob Keeney, Grant County Board of Supervisors – Agriculture and Natural Resources Planning
- Russell Kottke, Dodge County Board of Supervisors – 4-H Youth Development Planning
- Robert Krause, Shawano County Board of Supervisors – Organizational Structure Category
- Michael Krejci, Walworth County Board of Supervisors Citizen Member – Volunteer Support and Development Planning
- Shelia Stubbs, Dane County Board of Supervisors – County and Tribal Organizational Structure Planning
- Ben Wehmeier, Jefferson County Administrator – Community, Natural Resource and Economic Development Planning