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Swift County Farm Business Retention and Enhancement Program

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Abstract

Decreasing farm population has led to the closing of main street businesses, school consolidations, and other countywide economic problems. This article describes a community-based, citizen involvement model that was used to bring farmers and main street together to address the future of agriculture in Swift County, Minnesota.

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Introduction

Swift County is a farming-dependent county in west-central Minnesota. Like much of rural America, Swift County is feeling the negative effects of farm product prices that have sunk to levels not seen since the Great Depression. The resulting flight of farmers from the land has contributed to the closing of main street businesses, school consolidations, and other countywide economic problems. The problem goes beyond farming--and so should the solution.

This article describes a community-based, citizen involvement model that was used to bring farmers and main street businesses together to address the future of agriculture in Swift County.

Background

Business Retention and Expansion programs have been used for many years to help communities strengthen main street businesses. A program several years ago in Swift County was successful and led community leaders to explore other applications. Very few programs have applied BR&E to farming, but at the urging of County Commissioner Dick Hanson, a task force was formed to explore how the program might be tailored to the current needs of Swift County.

The task force endorsed the concept and established a local leadership team consisting of citizens with business, farming, and consumer interests to see the project through. The leadership team set itself the following goal: "A vision of agriculture will be created for Swift County and the surrounding area to help sustain the local economy and its communities."

The team then created five objectives that would further their vision:

1. To assess the needs of agricultural producers,
2. To help solve immediate concerns of agricultural producers,
3. To explore alternative agricultural ideas, cooperation ventures, and diversity of agricultural production operations, including livestock,

4. To create a support base and network among communities, government, business, and agricultural producers, and
5. To educate about the role of agriculture in the community.

Method

Once the objectives were in place, the leadership team collaborated with the University of Minnesota's Department of Applied Economics to create a general agricultural survey tool to assess the needs of Swift County farmers. The interview tool, consisting of 42 questions, was designed to focus on issues that lent themselves to local action and local solutions. Twenty-two local citizens were trained in using the survey. They were then sent out in groups of two to do the farmer interviews. Sixty-two farm families were interviewed in a period of 2 weeks.

When the survey process had been completed, the leadership team met to determine which farms surveyed had pressing concerns or "red flags." Twenty-four farm families were so identified. The Extension Educator coordinating the project then worked directly with those families or referred them to other professionals to see that their immediate concerns were addressed. In addition, the surveys generated many requests for information. In all, 693 pieces of information on various agricultural issues were sent out as a result of the survey.

Meanwhile, the research leader from the Department of Applied Economics tabulated the overall survey results and prepared a report that could be used to guide long-run planning. The leadership team used this report in identifying priority areas for action. The leadership team also received valuable input from a meeting on the University of Minnesota campus with a group of leaders in state and federal agencies, the Minnesota Farmers Union, a citizen group, and the Minnesota Extension Dean and Director. The following four priority projects were identified through this process:

1. Greater involvement and leadership for farm women,
2. Improved health care delivery for farmers,
3. Promote more effective use of farmer cooperatives, and
4. Improved delivery of information on alternative enterprises.

Committees made up of interested leadership team members, interviewers, and participating farmers were then formed to address each of these areas.

Outcomes

The group interested in strengthening the role of farm women initiated a Farm Women Forum. Averaging 37 women at its meetings, the Forum has allowed participants to focus on communication, fellowship, and leadership education. The group created the video "Healing Stories" that told the stories of three women in the forum.

The health care initiatives group focused their attention on Minnesota Care, a state insurance program for income-eligible people. In 1999, very few farmers in Swift County were signed up for the program. The task force arranged for enrollment to take place at a local office, instead of in St. Paul, and now over 50 farm families are enrolled. The task force is also pursuing state legislation that would further extend eligibility of the program to farmers.

Those working to promote more effective use of farmer cooperatives are concerned that cooperatives have strayed from their traditional role. The group is working with the Department of Applied Economics to develop educational materials for cooperative board members.

The alternative enterprises committee organized a meeting at which companies presented opportunities they had to offer local farmers. The meeting resulted in increased livestock numbers for the county and an additional 9,400 acres being farmed under contract. The contracts will increase farmer income by over \$300,000 beyond what could be earned with current market prices.

The committee also provided leadership in forming an export cooperative that will focus on soybeans for the Asian market. A \$10,000 start-up grant has been raised, along with an additional \$3,150 to be used by Swift County extension for field trials of edible soybeans.

The project also received an Award of Excellence from Business Retention and Expansion International. This recognition has further encouraged local participants in the projects.

A Long-Term Project

Stemming the flight from rural America will take time and will require many different approaches. It is clear, however, that local citizens must be involved. The Farm Business Retention and Enhancement project has already paid dividends in broad community participation in

strengthening agriculture. Prices are still low, and times are still tough, but in Swift County people are feeling more empowered and in control of their destiny.

For More Information

A copy of the Swift County BR&E research report, in summary form, can be found at:

<http://www3.extension.umn.edu/projects/bre/program/swiftsummary.pdf>

For general information on BR&E programming, please contact:

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