



Situation Analysis Report

Accomack County

2013

Accomack Extension Staff

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Introduction

Accomack County conducted a comprehensive situation analysis during the calendar year 2013. The situation analysis process was led by the Extension Leadership Council (ELC) and involved the development of an Accomack County Unit Profile as well as gathering community and resident perspectives on issues and problems in the county. Data and information from these two activities were analyzed by the ELC and priority issues were identified.

The first task was to develop a unit profile. Using online data resources provided from the VCE intranet and Extension personnel, Accomack Extension staff compiled the statistics into a profile of the county. These statistics were used to create a Key Informant Interview survey for the ELC to approve.

The ELC met one time during the situation analysis process in September 2013. At this meeting, an overview of the situation analysis process was covered and the attendees were asked to review the previously created survey. They approved the survey document and were given copies of the Key Informant Interview so that they could begin surveying residents and community partners. The results would then be compiled in time for the ELC to approve the priority issues at their next meeting.

Unit Profile

The County of Accomack, Virginia is one of two Virginia counties on the Delmarva Peninsula, commonly referred to as the “Eastern Shore”. The county comprises a total of 449.50 square miles and is bordered to the south by Northampton County, to the east by the Atlantic Ocean, to the west by the Chesapeake Bay and to the north by the state of Maryland. It consists of many rural villages surrounded by large agricultural tracts.

Topography in Accomack County is generally level and soils are mainly 8 to 10 inches of sandy loam above 30 inches of sandy clay and shell strata. Groundwater is the source of potable water. The county enjoys a mild climate with four distinct seasons.

The eastern shore, or “seaside”, of Accomack County is protected from erosion by barrier islands. These barrier islands are part of the Virginia Coast Reserve, but are open to the public for low-impact day use. The western shore, or “bayside”, is made up of several small peninsulas, or “necks”.

Conservation is a central element to Accomack County. Not only is the county part of the longest expanse of coastal wilderness remaining on the eastern seaboard of the United States, but it is also an important avian migration funnel in North America. Preservation has been a central concern to economic development officials as well as county zoning officials. Both have structured efforts in a way that will preserve natural resources while promoting growth, including eco-tourism and small business entrepreneurship.

According to data gathered from the VCE unit profile, Accomack County has experienced a 0.86% decrease in population from 2007 to 2011.

Accomack County has significant poverty problems. The 2011 mean household income in Accomack County is approximately \$34,678, which is lower than the mean household income of the rest of the state. The unemployment rate in 2007 was 5% and in 2011 it was 7.2%, an increase of 2.2%. The percentage of children living in poverty in 2011 was 31% compared to 16% for the state.

Although they are not the largest employers in the county, agriculture and aquaculture are the largest industries in Accomack. Between 2007 and 2012, the county has experienced a decrease in land used for agricultural production. In 2007 there were 248 farms and in 2012 Accomack had 226 farms. Along with the decrease in number of farms in Accomack County, the land in farms has decreased by 17%. More than 16,375 acres has dropped from agricultural production in the same time frame.

Accomack is the top five ranking county in the commonwealth for the value of sales by commodities for the production of grains and oilseeds (soybeans, corn, and wheat), snap beans, vegetables, melons, potatoes, sweet potatoes, poultry and eggs. The market value of agricultural products sold in Accomack increased 13% from 2007 to 2012.

Accomack is ranked fourth in the state for its value of aquaculture sales. While Northampton is home to the largest clam producing operation in the United States, Accomack County houses those offshoot operations that work cooperatively with said clam operation. Clams feed by pumping large amounts of water through their gills and filtering out their microscopic-sized food particles. Along with these small particles, they also filter out bacteria and viruses from the overlying water. Since these shellfish may be eaten raw, care has to be taken to ensure that shellfish harvested for direct marketing are taken from very clean water. Waters approved for the direct harvest of shellfish therefore must be much cleaner than waters approved for swimming, fishing, etc. Water quality was identified as an issue in the county.

The Accomack County public school system has five elementary schools, two middle schools and three high schools. Chincoteague middle is combined with the high school and on Tangier Island there is a combined school for pre-k through twelfth grade. The percentage of students eligible for the free and/or reduced lunch program as of October 2012 was 69.13%. Based on 2008-2009 data from the Virginia Department of Education, the school dropout rate was 3.35% for that time period.

According to a 2011-2012 study done by the Eastern Virginia Medical School, the rate of overweight and obese school age children in Accomack is just over 47%. The Virginia average is 31% and the national average is 34.7%. A total of 1,628 Accomack students in kindergarten and grades 3, 5, 7 and 10 had BMI measurements taken in the fall of 2011 for the study. The highest obesity rate was found in grade 5 at 54%. Childhood obesity is associated with type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular problems, asthma, cancer and other serious diseases and also may be linked to poor academic performance according to the report.

Community and Resident Perspectives

Based on issue areas identified in the unit profile, a Key Informant Interview survey was conducted by the ELC and by the staff and faculty of the Accomack Extension Office. Data was gathered from the eighteen respondents and evaluated by the ELC. Supplemental information was needed in the area of farming and Northampton County provided data from their situation analysis since agriculture in the two counties is similar.

Priority Issues

Based on the unit profile and resident perspectives data, the following top priority issues were identified for Accomack County.

Issue 1: Nutrition and Nutrition Education

Nutrition and nutrition education was identified as the top issue facing Accomack County. This includes addressing obesity and obesity prevention. Respondents voiced a need for education and public awareness. Although health is important to all age groups, some interviews said that young families needed nutrition and disease prevention education. The result of early education would be a healthier population in the future. The survey revealed that for many, inactivity or lack of physical activity was also a problem. There were also comments about the need for access to healthier, fresher foods. Access to organic and locally grown food was mentioned as an important necessity in the community.

This issue is currently being addressed with current unit VCE resources as well as other agencies. The Family Nutrition Program is working with several agencies to provide nutrition education to low income families and the aging population. The 4-H staff and the FNP program assistant are currently conducting Healthy Weights for Healthy Kids programming with all 6th graders in the county. Staff is also conducting nutrition and gardening programming on Tangier Island.

Issue 2: Affordable Housing and Employment Opportunities

Affordable housing and employment opportunities were identified as the second most pressing issue in Accomack County. All of the respondents that commented on this issue felt the high cost of living and lack of high paying jobs was crucial to solving this issue. One respondent went as far as to say “a great number of college graduates cannot move back home because of the lack of good paying jobs available in the community. Over time this creates a void in our tight-knit community.” The addition of rental housing availability was another necessity for Accomack County. Currently, there are few or substandard housing options for the low to middle income residents and the addition of affordable rental housing might address this issue.

This issue is outside the scope of VCE but should be addressed.

Issue 3: Infrastructure

The infrastructure of Accomack County was identified as the third most pressing issue. Many of those surveyed called for the addition of public transportation, youth and senior services and also the matter of rental housing came up again.

This issue is outside the scope of VCE but should be addressed.

Issue 4: Water Quality

Water quality was identified as the fourth most pressing issue in Accomack County. This is a key issue to the economy in both counties on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. All of the respondents that commented on this issue felt that water quality is crucial to the agriculture and aquaculture industries as well as tourism in Accomack County. Many of the respondents felt that there needs to be education about water conservation and preservation.

This issue is currently being addressed with current VCE unit resources with efforts to collaborate with producers, Soil and Water District personnel and federal agencies to identify programs which conserve groundwater resources, address drainage and storm water retention issues and provide educational information in the areas of irrigation management efficiency, crop water requirements and potential cost share sources that need to be explored to better address these issues.