



Situation Analysis Report

Page County

2013

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Introduction

Page County conducted a situation analysis in the fall of 2013. The situation analysis process was directed and conducted by the Extension Leadership Council (ELC) which consists of volunteers representing all program areas, non-Extension users and the paid VCE staff. The process consisted of the development of a Page County Unit Statistical Profile as well as gathering community and resident perspectives on issues and concerns in the county. Statistical data was compiled from numerous sources including the 2010 Census, 2007 Agriculture Census Data, VDACS, Health Department, Virginia Department of Education, and Virginia Employment Commission.

The ELC held four scheduled meetings during the situation analysis process. The first meeting was used to describe the need for the Situation Analysis and to provide an overview of the process. This meeting was also used to begin the process of reviewing a previously prepared unit statistical profile and scope out areas that needed further information. Based on the Unit Profile and the knowledge of the volunteer members of the ELC, it was determined to engage the community by using the targeted collection methods of Focus Groups and Key Informant Interviews plus a broad based Community Survey to assess community/resident perspective. The ELC determined the key individuals within the county to interview and the specific ELC teams to conduct interviews. ELC members assisted with focus groups by participating as part of the moderating teams and also choosing which areas to target as focus groups.

The second meeting brought together the ELC to update everyone on the status of the collection of the community perspective. Alterations to the process were decided and implemented to complete the compilation of data. The Local Chamber of Commerce weekly newsletter, the Page County Farmer's Association newsletter and Page County 4-H Facebook Page were solicited to discuss the situation analysis process in articles and encourage residents to respond to the community survey. Besides the general population, targeted groups for the survey included service organizations, county employees, county youth and retirees.

The third meeting of the ELC was used to prioritize the issues and concerns for Page County as determined by all collection methods and to provide a more complete description of each issue. The ELC determined the issues that could be addressed with current VCE resources (broken down to those which are currently being addressed and those which still need to be addressed) and those issues that are outside the scope of current VCE resources.

The fourth and final meeting of the Page ELC during the situation analysis process was used to edit and refine the report.

Unit Profile

Page County is situated in the Shenandoah Valley approximately 15 miles north and 15 miles east of Harrisonburg. The county consists of a valley nestled within the Shenandoah Valley. On the east it is bordered by the Blue Ridge Mountains and on the west by the Massanutten Mountain range. The primary east/west corridor must traverse the mountains to reach Interstate 81 or northern Virginia, the north/south corridor consists of a two lane highway.

The county consists of 202,240 acres with approximately 32% of the land mass in the Shenandoah National Park or National Forest system. The Shenandoah National Park runs the entire north-south eastern boundary of the county and the George Washington National Forest runs the entire length of the western boundary. The South Fork of the Shenandoah River runs through the county and the valley floor is 12-15 miles wide and 35-40 miles long.

Page County is the fourth largest agriculture county in the state when looking at dollars generated by agriculture sales. The County ranks number two in the state for pullets used for laying flock replacement. It also ranks number two in the state for sales of poultry and eggs. The County ranks third in the state for broilers, other white meat-type chickens and also for turkeys. These statistics show that poultry is obviously the primary agriculture industry in the county.

The other largest agriculture enterprises in the county are beef cattle and row crops. Feeding livestock comprises the bulk of farming enterprises. The extreme run-up in grain prices adversely affects the bottom line of most producers. At the same time, the dramatic increases in all farming inputs such as fuel, fertilizer, and pesticides has impacted the bottom line for all farmers.

Page County is seeing growth in alternative agriculture enterprises such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), wineries, the farmer's market and other agri-tourism ventures. The Buy Fresh Buy Local movement has certainly made strides in the Shenandoah Valley. In Page County a group of producers took this to a whole new level and started their movement through a group called Page County Grown. The county is also seeing growth in the greens industry.

Page County currently does not have an Agriculture and Natural Resource (ANR) Extension Agent housed in the unit but programming is being offered by ANR Extension Agents that serve the planning district. As budgets improve in the state and county, we could certainly benefit from an Agriculture and Natural Resource Extension Agent housed in Page County.

Virginia Department of Agriculture reported in 2007 that the average age of Virginia farmers is 57 years old. Page County is blessed with a large full-time farming population and a large, younger population interested in continuing the farming industry. However, this poses concerns about how the current farm operator transfers holdings while maintaining a sufficient income stream. Another issue that comes up when discussing the sustainability of the farm is the difficulty in hiring and retaining quality labor for jobs that have historically not been as high paying as non-agricultural jobs.

According to Virginia Department of Agriculture Statistics, the average size farm in Page County is 121 acres. Page County saw a decrease of \$112,000 in the amount of government payments that were made to farms from 2002 to 2007. During that same time Page County saw a growth of approximately \$40,000 more in the value of the products sold. Livestock sales made up 99% of the growth.

Page County's unemployment rate is currently the highest in the Shenandoah Valley. The unemployment rate for the county has been averaging 9.5%. This number increases during the months of December – February when the local tourism industry has a decline.

Statistics in the 2011 Census show that more than 65% of Page County residents commute out of the county for employment. Page County has historically had a large segment of its work force commute to jobs. The average commute for many of these individuals is an hour one way so the average 8 hour job requires the resident to be away from the community for 10 hours. This has an effect on recruiting and retaining volunteers to assist with Extension programs, activities and events.

Statistics show that Page County's median household income is \$43,435; approximately \$19,000 below the state average of \$62,391. Statistics from the county health ranking show that 14.1% of Page County is within the poverty level. Statistics from that same study show that 24% of children in Page County are within the poverty level. This higher than average poverty level and lower per capita income dictates that Page County Extension educational program opportunities must be kept at a minimal cost or no cost for residents within the poverty level to be involved.

According to the 2011 Health Summary, Page County rates higher than the state average in the areas of adult obesity and physical inactivity. The state average for adult obesity is 28% and Page County is at 32%. The state average for physical inactivity is 24% and Page County is at 28%. This indicates that Extension programming geared towards healthier lifestyle choices is very important in the locality.

According to the 2011 Census, the percentage of those individuals speaking languages other than English has decreased from 2.86% in 2000 to less than 1% in 2011.

On a positive note, data from the Virginia Department of Education's school performance report card shows that all seven of Page County's Public Schools are fully accredited.

According to the Virginia Department of Education the dropout rate for the state fell to 5.9% for the class of 2013. Page County is able to boast that their dropout rate is below the state average, with only a 1% percent dropout rate in 2013. Additionally, 97.7% of Page County students graduated on-time in 2013; this is 8.6% more students graduating on time than the state average of 89.1% on-time graduation. Census data also shows that the number of graduates continuing their education after high school has increased by 2.43% over the last five years.

According to the 2011 Census, the age demographic findings have stayed similar in Page County since 2007. There are various age brackets that have changed by less than a percentage. There has been a 2% increase in the 65-74 age demographic. This age demographic has been affected by retirees from the Northern Virginia area that want to stay close to friends and family but are looking for a lower cost economic bracket to sustain their retirement income. The larger change has been the approximately 4% decrease in the 25-44 age demographic. This demographic has most been affected by the high unemployment rate and lack of jobs in the county. The 2011 Census also shows an approximate 4% increase from 2007 in the number of houses that are vacant. This percentage is almost identical to the decrease in the 25-44 age demographic.

Community and Resident Perspective

The community and resident perspectives were collected via a broad based Community Survey and the targeted collection methods of Key Informant Interviews and Focus Groups.

The community survey was the best way to achieve a broad range of opinions on important issues facing the county. Besides the general population, large targeted groups for the survey included Chamber of Commerce members, service organizations and youth. The community responded by returning 83 usable surveys. Continuing to encourage strong agricultural programs and increasing employment opportunities were the top issues determined by the community survey. Other important issues included: programs geared towards a growing substance abuse problem in the county, family well-being, including the need for parenting education; nutrition and obesity education; financial education; water quality, protecting and improving the surface and groundwater with in the county; life skills and decision making for youth and encouraging teen leadership.

The ELC decided on which 15 individuals within the county would be interviewed. In making their decisions on individuals to interview, strong consideration was given to ensure that areas of the county often not accessed by Extension were covered. These key informants comprised a variety of individuals including business leaders, elected officials, agricultural community leaders, town managers, law enforcement, civic leaders and employees representing education. Improved economic development and high unemployment were the primary concerns of the Key Informants. Other concerns coming from key informant interviews were better transportation routes, long-range planning for the county, inadequate life skills/job skills training, lack of tax base, growing substance abuse issues, lack of communication, vision and focus with in the counties governing bodies, public awareness of agriculture, need for more exploration in agri-tourism, lack of volunteers in the community coupled with a growing attitude of individuals wanting to see opportunities but being unwilling to assist in making things happen.

The ELC decided to conduct four focus groups with organizations that represented all program areas of Virginia Cooperative Extension: agriculture, family and consumer sciences and youth development. The focus group meetings were conducted with the Page County Farmer's Association, Department of Social Services and participants at After School Program at Page County Middle School, and the Page Alliance for Community Action. The focus groups highlighted the need to do something to improve the primary highways of the county in order to help recruit businesses to locate in the county; general lack of jobs; the underlying strife that occurs when a non-farming population moves into a rural agricultural community; affordable low income housing; lack of quality child day care facilities; substance abuse issues and public transportation.

In collecting the perspectives there was also great concern among many of those involved in the focus groups and key informant interviews that many who need the education and classes on topics such as parenting, nutrition, financial management, job skills, etc. fail to see the importance of gaining these skill sets. The ELC was particularly frustrated as programs have been offered by the Virginia Cooperative Extension – Page Unit Office on family financial

management, nutrition and food safety, yet the classes have been cancelled because participants did not register to attend. These concerns lead to lengthy discussions on how to get the people to attend classes and programs. Discussion even included the possibility of mandating classes for certain topics. The groups believed that mandates just create the additional burden of policing and administering the repercussions of not attending. This adds more strain on an already overwhelmed system and it creates participants more concerned about meeting the requirements rather than being educated. Although the solution to getting residents to attend could not be found, it was clear that we must continue to offer the programs in the hopes that people will attend. This was not ranked as an overall priority issue but the ELC did want the information recorded in the situation analysis report.

Priority Issues

Based on the unit profile and resident perspectives data from above, the following top issues were identified for Page County.

Economic Development/Lack of Employment

This was identified as the top issue facing Page County. This has been an ongoing issue in our county; Economic Development/Lack of Employment has been identified as the top issue each time that an analysis has been completed. The high unemployment rate causes a domino effect with many people having trouble meeting their daily expenses and thus spending less. Lack of business and industry also reduces the county and town's tax base.

VCE is addressing this issue within its resource ability. Locally, VCE is working with Page County Grown and other non-profits to promote the Buy Fresh - Buy Local concept to improve both farmer's income and diet & nutrition available to residents. There are large portions of this issue that are outside the scope of VCE to address.

Inadequate Life Skills/Job Skills Training

This was identified as the second most important issue in Page County. There is a general consensus among county employers that many residents in the county need job preparation skills training. Employers are also discouraged with the amount of money they spend in training employees who do not continue working long enough for the employer to recoup even a portion of the money they put out in training. It was further discussed that residents in the county need education and training on financial management and family budgeting because this would help individuals to realize the importance of obtaining and maintaining employment.

This issue is being addressed to some extent by VCE resources. The youth programs: Reality Store and Real Money Real World being introduced in the middle schools and high schools will do a great job of getting young people to understand the importance of job training and the affects it has on their financial situation. Extension offers a wide range of programs to adults on financial management, including family budgeting and cost saving measures for tight economic times. As discussed in multiple focus groups and among ELC members, it is frustrating that programs that are needed by residents are offered but then not attended. Extension must continue to hold these programs and find new and better ways to increase attendance. There are also large portions of this issue that are outside of the scope of VCE to address.

Loss of Farmland (Viability of the Farm)

This was identified as the third most important issue in Page County but was the top ranked issue as expressed by the agriculture community. A multitude of reasons are involved in the loss of farmland including the migration of workers from crowded urban areas and retirees moving into the area to take advantage of the lower taxes and the picturesque view. Other reasons for this loss of farmland is the lack of profitability in traditional enterprises and the problems associated with transitioning the farm from one generation to the next which

increases pressure to develop the land. The rate at which change is occurring in the county has created an increasingly faster loss of traditional farmland, thus creating concerns with land-use planning to maintain the county's rural agricultural heritage.

This issue is being addressed to some extent by VCE resources. The best avenues for controlling growth are the adoption of comprehensive plans by local government officials. Extension also has a role in designing programs to address the needs that arise as a result of this growth. Extension can also partner with other agencies and organizations to present relevant information about planning, taxes, and development rights.

Public Awareness of Agriculture

This was identified as the fourth most important issue in Page County and was ranked the second issue as expressed by the agriculture community. Agriculture is one of the main local industries. Page County agriculture is also important beyond the county boundaries as we rank as the fourth largest agricultural producing county in the state. There is a large national movement to understand where our food comes from and how it is produced as well as a realization that the world population is growing and we must learn to produce more food. Based on the fact that we do live in a high producing agriculture county, it is often assumed that there is a general public awareness of agriculture but this is not the case. It is equally important that community members outside of agriculture gain a better understanding of where their food comes from, how to produce it, and the various regulations that come with producing the food.

This issue is being addressed to some extent by VCE resources. Extension must continue programs involving youth livestock, youth gardening and farm to table concepts that highlight what it takes to get the food to the family table. Extension also collaborates with county groups that have a shared interest in promoting the value of agriculture.

Teen Leadership/Life Skills/Decision Making for Youth

This was identified as the fifth most important issue. Youth need to be encouraged to take on leadership roles and develop their life skills, and feel a connection to their community. Working with youth to better understand the important role they play in their future and the future of those around them is important to keep them tied to the community and prevent them from engaging in risky behavior. Youth need to be engaged in leadership roles so that they become empowered rather than entitled. Empowered youth gain responsibility, job skills, and are more able to seek employment and college acceptance. This leads to youth becoming active and contributing adult members of society.

This issue is currently being addressed with VCE resources. The 4-H Youth Development program utilizes youth volunteers for 4-H programs, including Overnight 4-H Camp, Day Camp, Youth Livestock Advisory and Club Officers. Teen volunteers complete applications, reference checks and face to face interviews to fulfill these volunteer roles. This process prepares them for workforce and college experiences. 4-H Club officers and teen leaders plan programs for their respective groups; these individuals give leadership to the planning process

which gives them a vested interest. Youth leaders are able to take pride in the success of events they plan and execute. Youth volunteers are more likely to encourage participation from their peers because they have been empowered through their responsibilities. VCE must continue to recognize the value of youth as role models and give them the opportunity to be leaders among their peers.

Family Well-Being

This was identified as the sixth most important issue. Page County has above average rates of obesity, inactivity, and diabetes. There are 14.1% of residents living with in the poverty level. Through community survey, focus groups and key informant interviews it was reiterated countless times that there is a lack of adequate parenting skills and understanding of child development. Parents must understand the importance of the impact their decisions have on their children. We must give our families the tools to build strong relationships and positive behaviors within their families and find a way to redirect the next generation's beliefs and activities to encourage a change in the current pattern.

This issue is currently being addressed with VCE resources. Extension will need to maintain quality programs that address family well-being issues.

The youth development program has been and continues to increase the number of programs it is offering on healthy lifestyle choices for youth. Teaching nutrition lessons and stressing the importance of physical activity to help lower the level of obesity and life style related diseases is paramount. These programs need to concentrate on making those lifestyle choices on a limited income. Throughout focus groups, key informant interviews and the discussion of the Extension Leadership Council it was reiterated that the best results in attitude change will come from the next generation. It is much easier to make a healthy lifestyle change at an earlier age. Active and healthy youth will encourage their parents and grandparents to make healthier choices.

Our planning district does not currently have the staff to offer parenting classes. Extension is collaborating with groups that offer parenting education. Through these partnerships we are being provided additional opportunities to explain that healthy life style choices are an important element of parenting.

Tourist Industry

This was identified as the seventh most important issue in Page County. Tourism provides service industry income. Page County draws many tourists that visit Luray Caverns and Shenandoah National Park. The county and towns are working very hard to capitalize on the money available to be spent by this transient population. Attractions are being developed to hold tourists in the community for more than a short visit. As the tourist stay in the community longer it provides more opportunities for service businesses that meet the needs of meals and lodging.

VCE is addressing this issue within its resource ability. Extension has worked with the agriculture community to take greater advantage of agri-tourism opportunities. Programs that continue to educate both the farmer and the consumer on the importance of buying and selling locally are very important. Additional efforts need to be explored in addressing new markets, responding to the desire for locally sourced food, resources on how to bring products to market and helping family farms market their products. This is evidenced by the growth of Page County Grown, farmer's markets, the pumpkin patch, corn maze, as well as wineries and Christmas tree farm. There are still other venues to be considered. Large portions of this issue are outside the scope of VCE to address.

Substance Abuse

This was identified as the eighth most important issue in Page County. The use of illicit drugs and/or the abuse of prescription and over-the-counter drugs are a growing problem in the county. This becomes a problem for families because these addictions lead to poor job performance or job loss and can also lead to physical and mental abuse in the home. Substance Abuse also leads to the issue of increased crime incidents with abusers working to obtain drugs. Then there is the financial burden of prosecuting the crimes and housing the criminals.

Most of this issue is outside the scope of VCE to address. Extension will work to inform local law enforcement of the scope of our mission. This will enable local law enforcement to collaborate with our organization should they feel there is an opportunity.

Comprehensive Long Range Planning

This was identified as the ninth most important issue in Page County. Page County has a comprehensive plan as mandated by law, however; a large segment of the population feels that they had no real input in the development of the plan and that it is such a broad overview that it is virtually meaningless. Many residents feel that what has been agreed to in the past has not been followed up on by government officials. The failure to communicate this plan and its components to county residents, and the counties decision to jump from one problem to another rather than following the Comprehensive Plan, has caused Page County to become reactive rather than proactive.

Extension can play an important role in the development of these plans by educating constituents on the loss of farmland including the migration of workers from crowded urban areas and retirees moving into the area to take advantage of the low taxes and the scenic view. Extension can encourage the agriculture community to become involved in the solution by talking with elected officials and volunteering to sit on committees that will offer the agriculture community a voice in developing the long range comprehensive plans. This will allow for growth while still maintaining our agricultural industry and agricultural heritage. It is also understood that a large portion of this issue is outside of the scope of VCE to address.

Water Quality

This was identified as the tenth most important issue in Page County. Page County, according to the 2012 Water Quality Assessment completed by the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, continues to have streams declared impaired because of E.coli and fecal coliform contamination. The affected watersheds continue to work through the process of controlling sources of contamination. The stream impairment is caused by agriculture production, wildlife and homeowner activities. Roughly half of the county population is serviced by private ground water supplies. Drinking water testing clinics have been offered in the county for the last two years. Results indicated that 43% of those households participating in the clinics exceeded the standard for coliform bacteria and 9% exceeded the standard for e-coli bacteria.

This issue is being addressed to some extent by VCE resources. Extension programs that test and provide well water analysis have been held in Page County the last two years. Extension programs on Total Maximum Daily Load and Nutrient Management Plans, Best Agricultural Practices, Soil Quality, Alternative Energy Sources, Buying Locally and Fencing continue to assist in creating improved Water Quality. There are still large portions of this issue that are outside the scope of VCE to address.

An Inadequate Road System

This was identified as the eleventh most important issue in Page County. The lack of economic development in the county is further hindered by a road system that is not conducive to business. Topography plays a part in this issue. Entry to the county is gained by crossing either the Blue Ridge or Massanutten Mountain range on a two or three lane road or via a two lane north-south highway. There have been major road improvement and bridge projects for the primary north-south highway. This should enhance business interest in the county and also make it easier and safer for the large number of residents who make the commute to Northern Virginia for work.

This issue is outside the scope of VCE to address.

Lack of Volunteers in the Community

This was identified as the twelfth most important issue in Page County. People have the desire to see new things happen in the county, but are not motivated to take on these new tasks. The volunteers willing to work are volunteering for multiple organizations, but after a while, they burn out. People will often collaborate on a project to get it started, but after the initial work is accomplished, no one is willing to maintain the program.

This issue is currently being addressed with VCE resources. Extension must continue to provide opportunities for individuals to volunteer when and where their time permits. We must continue to train the volunteers to handle the situations that arise in their volunteer roles. This allows them to be more productive volunteers in non-extension programs in the county. There continues to be large portions of this issue outside the scope of VCE to address.