



Virginia Cooperative Extension

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Situation Analysis Report



Smyth County

2013

Smyth County Extension Staff

Daniel Collins, 4-H Youth Extension Agent
Andrew Overbay, Agriculture and Natural Resources Senior Extension Agent
Pam Testerman, Unit Administrative Assistant
Laurinda Sturgill, 4-H Program Assistant
Kim Russell, FNP Program Assistant

Smyth County Extension Leadership Council

Charlie Atkins, Chair/County CFO (Atkins District)
Hillary Overbay, ESL Instructor (Chilhowie)
Lindy White, SCC Hospital CEO (Marion)
J. S. Staley, Farmer (Marion)
Daniel Sturgill, Teacher (Sugar Grove)
Toby Haynes, Green house Operator (Broadford)
Dennis Carter, Ass't Superintendent, Smyth Schools (Saltville)
Geraldine Montgomery, African American Volunteer (Chilhowie)
Patsy Waddle, Female Farm Owner, (Rich Valley)
Josh Osborne, Native American Young Farmer (Konnarock)

Introduction

Smyth County conducted a comprehensive situation analysis during the fall of 2013. Using the Situational Analysis of 2004 (SA 2004) as a baseline, the process was conducted by the Extension Leadership Council (ELC) and involved the development of a unit profile utilizing the ELC as key community leaders. The purpose of the situation analysis is to take a comprehensive look at Smyth County in regard to aspects of the economic and demographic data, and it's relation to extension programming.

The ELC met after reviewing the SA 2004 tried to identify the resources that we have. We reviewed some of the data in the County comprehensive plan and it looked like we had everything in order to begin the situation analysis. It was decided by the group that we would reflect on county, community and national data, such as the 2010 United States Census and the 2007 Census of Agriculture. It is recognized that much of the information available is dated and that the county office and the ELC are to remain sensitive to county needs for informal educational programming needs.

Unit Profile

Smyth County is located in the Southwestern part of the state, a mountainous region that includes the highest point in Virginia on Mount Rogers. Smyth County is divided into three distinct valleys separated by mountains, with Interstate 81 running the length of the middle valley. We are blessed with an abundance of water with one of the three forks of the Holston River running the length of each valley and various streams and springs located throughout the county. The population of the county has not changed significantly over the past 20 years, which hovers around 32,000. There are three major population centers in the county, Marion and Chilhowie on the Middle Fork of the Holston River and Saltville on the North Fork. The average rain fall is about 42 inches, the average last frost date is May 15 and the average first frost date is October 15. This can vary as much as 10 days from different elevations in the county.

SA 2004 found Smyth County had a declining and aging population; this trend continues for 2013. While we had areas of growth in some categories of school aged youth, our population percentages for adults in the age brackets of working and highly employed people (ages 25-55), Smyth County had declines across the board. Elderly citizen percentages grew in almost every category and while a fairly low percentage of our population is in the "oldest" age bracket of 85+ years, Smyth County's population of that group is 25% higher than the State average and 10% higher than the National average. This phenomenon creates an issue with care of elder people spread across fewer wage earning and able bodied citizens in the County.

Racial demographics are virtually unchanged from the findings of SA 2004. The percentage of people reporting their race as being White is 96.7 with the next largest group being those reporting black or African American at 1.9. The percentage of Hispanic citizens increased over 33% since the SA 2004, growing from 0.9% to 1.23% of the population. Given the homogeneity of the population, one strong point among Extension educational offerings is the parity of programming inviting participation among racial groups. The office strives to always

seek and serve underserved audiences and we seek to enlist volunteers that can speak to the needs of citizens regardless of race.

SA 2004 found that one of the more significant differences between Smyth County and Virginia statistics was education. While still below State and National numbers, we commend the efforts of our public school system in helping close the gap. In Smyth County the 2013 High School graduation rate was 88%, the same as the State average! Since SA 2004, the rate in Virginia has grown 7 points while the County rate has increased nearly 20 points! Persons receiving a Bachelor's degree or higher from 2011 were 14.3 percent for Smyth County while Virginia was 34.4% (over 6 points greater than the National Average.)

Economically, Smyth County has experienced growth in both the extreme upper and lower ends of the wage scale. The percentage of citizens earning below \$10,000 per year grew in 2011 as compared to 2007; however, there was also growth among all income brackets with incomes greater than \$100,000 per year. County Median Household Income fell nearly \$3000 from 2007 to 2011 and came in nearly \$30,000 less than the 2011 figures for Virginia. This was collected prior to the closing of some larger employers in the county such as Merrilat, a cabinet maker in Atkins. The 2012-13 numbers may well be even more grim. Virginia's income figures exceed the National figures by more than \$10,000 per year; however, Smyth County has not enjoyed that economic windfall.

Smyth County is home to 1,540 business and those businesses employ 11,726 people. Service and manufacturing continue to be leading non-agriculture industry sectors in the County. Between the two facets of our local economy, over 64% of Smyth County citizens are employed. Retail and Government sectors add another 21% to the total employment picture.

Agricultural Statistics

Smyth County is one of the smallest counties in land area. Much of the land area we have is taken up by Jefferson National Forrest which does provide a vast resource for recreation and potential timber harvest. In spite of these issues, agriculture continues to be a major economic engine for the county. The pastures of Smyth County are home to nearly 40,000 head of cows and calves (both beef and dairy.) This means that in Smyth County, cows outnumber people by over 6,700. There are 761 farms in Smyth County, 110 less than 2002. The farms in the county are growing; since the 2002 Census of Agriculture, the county has seen a growth in farm acreage by 2,500 acres. These acres account for a large portion of the tax base for local income not counting personal property taxes on vehicles and machinery.

Market values of farms have nearly doubled in the County and incomes reported in the 2007 are significantly higher than 2002. It should be noted that the numbers of the 2007 Census of Agriculture do not reflect that explosion of value in the meat livestock industries, especially in the beef industry. Recent VQA sales have seen record prices paid to farmers for their calf crops, with the average calf sold at over \$1000 per head.

Expenses have also risen as well, especially in the areas of livestock feed, fuel and fertilizer. These occurrences have been addressed and continue to be addressed by local Extension

programming where producers are given valuable information on the analysis of purchases for maximum return on the dollar. For example, in response to the escalation in corn prices, the numbers of acres dedicated to row crop production increased dramatically in 2013. Extension faculty presented programming on the economics of corn production and the need to consider all costs when determining if growing corn fit the overall farm goals.

Community and Resident Perspectives

The Smyth County ELC has several new members and as we are rebuilding, we used the ELC as a Focus Group of Key Informants from across the county. Representatives from county leadership, agriculture, youth and education, and health care were some of the facets of the county represented. Issues were listed and then weighted as to both importance and capability for Extension to help address.

Priority Issues

Leadership (Mentors/Voids)

Every member of the focus group felt that a huge issue in Smyth County is a future need for highly competent and focused leaders. It was agreed that Extension, especially the 4-H Youth Development Program, can help address this need. Four H teaches young people how to organize meetings and discuss issues in a positive manner.

Parent/Family Guidance

In close association with Leadership as an issue, the lack of leadership in the home and the reliance on the public schools to teach morals and proper behavior was seen as an important issue in our county. Again, youth programming can help curb some of the pressure that the reality of county home life brings.

Careers (Wages, Retention of Youth)

In the SA 2004, one of the top issues was “Jobs.” Our focus group decided that what was really needed were jobs that evolved into careers and with that evolution, higher wages. Extension as an agent of change can help people realize their full potential and reach levels of satisfaction that leads to more balance in their lives.

Integration of Technology/Communication

People have more and more modes of communication available to them and it is important that Extension and all agencies that serve the citizens of Smyth County need to be aware and using as many different forms as possible. Smyth County has a large segment of aged citizens who tend to be less “tech savvy” than their younger counterparts. Traditional forms of communication (word of mouth, postal service) are important to maintain to allow Extension to reach underserved audiences. It was noted that our county is served by two television

markets....Bristol to the west of Marion, and Roanoke to the east of Marion. This can create some disjointedness in the awareness of citizens about opportunities.

Nutrition

Obesity in Smyth County is an issue. Our county has a higher than normal level of meals served by fast food outlets. We also have a growing number of food vendors, both wholesale and retail, that need information and education in order to be profitable and maintain or elevate food safety.

Overall Education

While the public schools in Smyth County are viewed as excellent in their quality, we are among the state's lowest in teacher pay. Education also needs to include both formal and informal methods to help citizens reach their full potential.

Agricultural Issues (Women in Agriculture/Literacy)

Agriculture is the leading industry in Smyth County. As such, it continues to curry favor in Extension programming. While traditional programming in Farm Business Management and Beef Cattle Production need to continue, it was noted that more and more farms in the county are led by women and they have special needs for education in both content and form. Agricultural Literacy is a focus of Extension and the Farm Bureau as it is recognized that too many citizens fail to see agriculture as an industry in the county.