

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY WIDE INPUT IN DEFINING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES AND PLANS: A CASE STUDY OF AN AGRARIAN COMMUNITY

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Abstract

This case study describes the process by which a county-based Extension Educator used a survey process to help focus and facilitate local stakeholders who were concerned about economic development challenges. A small committee's involvement in the survey design created a forum and focus for the committee to think carefully and thoughtfully about potential options and strategies, rather than simply making the global statement that economic development is a priority. Although the survey design did not meet the highest standards of scientific scrutiny, it is argued that the results (a) were intuitively on target (b) provide more information than would have otherwise been the case (c) stimulate discussions and community dialogues that will lead to a greater chance for consensus and buy-in and (d) generate a community decision making process that is ultimately better informed, more transparent and thoughtful.

Introduction

Educators are often asked to develop and provide programming in response to a perceived community need or opportunity. In most cases, a small group of local stakeholders works with the educator to help design and customize the educational package. But, what if the local group of stakeholders--for whatever reasons—is not as well informed as they believe think they are in relation to the perceived local need? How can the educator work with such a group to help determine and design a process of needs assessment and priority setting that will provide guidance to the local effort?

This case study involves a situation in which an Extension Educator in a very agriculturally based county in Indiana (Benton County) became involved with a local economic development initiative. The initiative presupposed that educational and technical assistance geared toward agriculture would be appropriate, given the historical agricultural base of the county. However, it was also recognized that agriculture is not a growth industry and many people in the community may be interested in diversifying the economy or be skeptical of certain aspects of contemporary agricultural practices (e.g., “industrial agriculture”).

A small ad hoc committee was formed to help with this strategic question at hand. It included local stakeholders (e.g., a county commissioner, banker and local foundation director) and external resource people (e.g., campus faculty and representatives from the state government).

A mail survey was designed for county residents to gain input into three basic questions:

1. What should be the focus for economic development and planning?
2. What services are expected from those doing economic development?
3. What sectors of the local economy need attention during the next five years?

Research Objectives

The objective of using this type of evaluative survey instrument was to show how participatory applied research could be used as both an assessment tool for needs identification and as an educational tool to further and heighten local interest and involvement.

Community needs assessments have been used often to ascertain public opinion. Since communities are in a continual state of change, the character and mood of a community can make many shifts as a result of the interplay of social, cultural, and economic changes. (Butler, 1980, reprinted 1993).

Concluding that economic development would be a priority within the county was easy to conclude. Dougherty and Plein (1997) conducted a survey in West Virginia of local officials in 1996 asking them to rank 164 items independently based on the importance of each item within their community. Not surprisingly economic development topped the list of local government concerns. Times have not changed much since then. The concern is that the target is easily identified but how can a local focused group of stakeholders get down to the details of actually having an impact and accomplishing tangible goals towards bringing the right kind of development into the community. The "right kind" is often of key importance. Further in this paper, the demographic description of Benton County Indiana will be detailed and juxtaposed against the importance of "retaining county character". It was hoped that survey results would provide some direction so the county dialogue could move beyond the global notion that economic development is needed.

Methodology

Several surveys that had been used in other states were reviewed. Borrowing some content and design from several examples, the local Extension Educator drafted an instrument that seemed to capture the questions that the local economic development committee needed answered. In terms of survey design, parsimony was emphasized and the 40 items on the survey simply required a quick check mark.

Beginning in January, the draft survey was scrutinized by the local stakeholder group and final changes were made. Once the survey was agreed to, the instrument was submitted for approval through Purdue's Human Subjects process. The survey was mailed out on March 1, 2004. Prior to the first of March, a mailing list was compiled from several sources. This was NOT a random sample of county households, but was generated from the local Extension office stakeholder list which gave it a heavy bent towards those who tended to be linked to the agricultural sector within the county. Those who were living out of the county were purged and duplicate names were eliminated. Consequently, the list that contained over 900 was reduced to 575.

An example of the how the instrument looked is presented below. The version that was mailed out of course did not have the coding displayed and is shown here to demonstrate the Likert-type scale that was used.

1. What should be the focus of economic planning and development in Benton County?

Major Focus 5 pts	A Focus 4 pts	Interest Area 3 pts.	No Interest 2 pt	No Opinion 1 pts.
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Agriculture and Food Processing					
Conservation of Natural Resources					
Define future of County Character					
Promoting US 52/41					

The remaining two questions had the same response categories and were worded as follows:

2. What services do you, your business, organization, or local unit of government expect from those doing economic development in Benton County?
3. What sectors of the economy do you feel need attention during the next five years in Benton County?

Over 130 surveys were returned within the first two weeks. An additional 6 surveys were returned by April 2 at which time no additional surveys were accepted for the analysis. The response rate was 24 percent which is not atypical for a mail out survey.

Community Profile

Benton County is 406 square miles and is approximately 20 miles long and wide. There has been a gradual loss of population for many years. The population in 2002 was 9,441. With a population density of only 23 persons per square miles, Benton County ranks 88 among Indiana's 92 counties in terms of density. Benton County is bordered on the west by Illinois and on the east by Tippecanoe County, home to Lafayette, West Lafayette, and Purdue University. Tippecanoe County has a population of 152,000 people.

The land in Benton County is level. Before the time of European settlement, Benton County was the beginning of the Midwest long-grass prairie region. The soil remains productive. In 2003, Benton County had the highest production and yield of corn among all of Indiana counties. It typically ranks among the top three counties in soybean production and yield as well. With 119,000 acres of corn and 112,000 acres of soybeans, Benton County is truly a farming county.

Benton County has 5,641 persons in the labor force. Of these, 3,520 live and work within the county. Most of the rest work in neighboring counties--especially Tippecanoe County.

Most of the county's industries, though few, relate mainly to the agricultural base. There are grain elevators, farmer cooperatives, farm management businesses, and seed and chemical distributorships. More recently, a major dairy has established in the county and another has been granted permission to begin building and doing business. A town in the neighboring county to the northwest is suing the Benton County Board of Zoning Appeals over the approval of this dairy on the basis of concerns about the ground water impact. There is also an option to buy around 300 acres of Benton County land by a non-hazardous waste handling company. Finally, there is a proposal to build about 45 acres of wind turbines for electrical generation in Benton County.

Some of these developments have become controversial and another controversy involves the local schools. A referendum to raise additional funds for local schools failed for the second time in December 2003. Consequently, the school board is proposing the closure of two of the four

elementary schools and the building of a single facility near the existing consolidated high school.

With these types of community dynamics, the future direction of Benton County and its economic development possibilities are at the forefront of local discussions.

Results

The first question asked about the respondent to indicate what he or she believed should be the focus of economic planning and development in Benton County. The three areas that ranked highest were:

- *Land Use Planning with a mean score of 4.17
- *Agriculture & Value Added Processing with a mean score of 4.13
- *Farming with a mean score of 4.01

At the other extreme were the following two items:

- *Retaining Current County Character with a mean score of 2.88
- *Tourism & Recreation with a mean score of 2.55

The second question focused on what services the respondent felt should be provided by those involved in economic development in Benton County. Three services were ranked quite high:

- *Attracting New Business and Industry with a mean score of 4.36
- *Retaining Existing Business and Industry with a mean score of 4.25
- *Creating New Businesses with a mean score of 4.19

At the other extreme were the following two items:

- *Recruit New Workers into the County with a mean score of 3.26
- *Be a Source of Economic, Financial and Demographic Data Collection with a mean score of 3.24

The final question asked about what sectors of the local economy should receive attention during the next five years. The three sectors ranking highest were:

- *Agriculture / Ag Processing with a mean score of 4.15
- *Manufacturing with a mean score of 3.84
- *Health Services with a mean score of 3.72

The two sectors with the lowest ranking were:

- *Transportation with a mean score of 3.01
- *Wholesale with a mean score of 2.77

Conclusions and Implications

It was not surprising that Land Use Planning surfaced as the high priority for economic development and planning, given the ongoing controversies over landfills, large dairies, and windmills. The emphasis placed on farming probably reflects the fact this is the historical foundation of the local economy. However, unless there is interest in more concentrated types of agriculture (e.g., confined livestock and dairy operations) there is little opportunity for expansion of the farming sector. Hence, the importance placed on farming may simply reflect the desire to maintain the existing farm production. This would be consistent with the priority

also give to Agriculture and Value Added Processing. After all, this "next level" beyond the farm gate will not be possible if the basic production is lagging. Additionally, ethanol production and biodiesel possibilities have been discussion topics within Benton County. Finally, the mailing lists used tended to be skewed in the direction of agriculture so that may help explain the high ranking of these two items.

Given that farming and agriculturally related activities were ranked high, it was a bit surprising that Retaining County Character did not rank high. Additionally, Benton County has such a rural character, we hypothesized that future development must be constantly aware of the preservation of that character. Apparently the future loss of two small town schools and heightened awareness of the county's financial situation has mitigated the need to keep what is in exchange for something that might be better for local residents and their families. The low ranking given Tourism and Recreation is not surprising as the county does not appear to have any real comparative advantage in that area, except for some potential in agritourism and agroentertainment.

Attracting, retaining, expanding, and creating enterprises are the major economic development strategies used nationally and Benton County responses simply mirrored that. Increasingly, however, the research literature suggests the attraction strategy is generally not that effective and more attention needs to go into retaining, expanding and creating businesses. The low ranking given to attracting new workers is not surprising. After all, a large proportion of the existing labor force is already commuting to other counties to find work.

As for the priority areas over the next five years, Ag and Ag Processing claimed dominance followed closely by Manufacturing and Health Services. For the reasons given earlier the prominence of Ag and Ag Processing came as no real surprise. The emergence of manufacturing as a focal point for the future is a bit surprising. Although manufacturing has been an extremely important sector for Indiana, Benton County has very little manufacturing. Moreover, the manufacturing sector has struggled in Indiana and nationally in recent years due to the improved competitive position in manufacturing of other countries, e.g., Mexico and China. The importance the respondents wanted to place on health care is no surprise. Benton County recently lost regular service at its resident clinic forcing many to drive to Lafayette for major and minor medical attention.

In sum, most of the major findings seem plausible and consistent with what one might expect from a survey of Benton County. However, having quantifiable data is very useful as a vehicle for stimulating thinking and discussion at the community or neighborhood level. Our survey results, while appearing plausible and practical, need to be qualified when shared with the local citizenry. Qualifications include a response rate that is somewhat marginal and a mailing list that was not necessarily representative of the entire county's population. Although such shortcomings are important from a scientific perspective, the survey results are surely an improvement over a small group of stakeholders coming together with just their own hunches and biases. Additionally, the process of helping to create the survey and to lead discussions and community dialogues about the results leads to a more informed, transparent and thoughtful decision-making process, even when the survey design is not perfect.

References

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