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Ohio Township Trustees' Land Use Planning Knowledge and Practices: A Statewide Survey to Better Target Programmatic Resources

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Abstract

To better meet the educational needs of local officials charged with land use planning, a statewide survey of Ohio township trustees was conducted in fall 2005 to identify: gaps in knowledge; continuing education participation habits; preferences for training and training providers and; familiarity with Extension programs in the area of land use planning. On average, 50% of trustees indicated more knowledge was needed. Nearly 80% had not attended land use planning related training in the past 2 years. As a training provider, Extension was ranked third, and two in 10 respondents were familiar with Extension programs.

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Introduction

Extension programming in land use planning has been conducted with elected and appointed officials throughout Ohio since the rural population began to increase in the 1960s. While population growth in the state has been relatively modest over the past two decades, the outer edges of Ohio's metropolitan areas have experienced explosive population growth. Furthermore, as the average daily commute time continues to increase, formerly rural areas of the state have begun to experience population growth as well (Perry & Mackun, 2001).

To help local officials manage this change, land use planning education focusing on the use of zoning, subdivision regulations, and comprehensive land use planning has been offered to local officials and township trustees in particular, for about the past 9 years. Roughly 25 educational workshops have been conducted involving over 250 elected and appointed officials throughout the state of Ohio. Educational efforts have not only included formal instruction, but also informal facilitation of land use planning, creation of subdivision regulations, and zoning ordinances for local clientele.

To date, most of these programming efforts were offered as a result of specific requests, after consultation with the clientele to identify specific programmatic needs. Most of these offerings have been fairly well received. However, a potential exists to develop programming of relevance to a much larger audience because this particular clientele group is comprised of nearly 4,000 township trustees. (Ohio's 88 counties contain 1,309 townships, each of which has a board of trustees containing three members.)

One of the critical first steps in program development entails understanding clientele needs (Birkenholz, 1999; Boleman & Cummings, 2005; Hudkins & Blaine, 1999; Nieto, Schaffner, &

Henderson, 1997). It was the desire to better meet the educational needs of this clientele group that led to the development of a statewide study and the results presented in this article.

Purpose and Objectives

Using formal survey methodology to better understand community officials charged with land use planning is one way to measure existing program quality as well as determine future program direction (Haines, 2002; Seidl, 2001). In order to better target programmatic resources, objectives of the study reported here were to:

1. Gain an understanding of existing knowledge levels with respect to zoning, subdivision regulations, and comprehensive land use planning.
2. Determine the extent to which this clientele group participates in continuing education related to these land use planning tools.
3. Describe the preferred training provider.
4. Identify the level of familiarity with Extension Land Use Programs.

In short, we wanted to identify gaps in knowledge, continuing education habits, preferences for training and training providers, and familiarity with Extension programs in the area of land use planning.

Methodology/Survey Design

Data were collected in fall 2005 using a survey instrument mailed to 500 randomly selected Ohio township trustees. A four-wave mailing was used following the Tailored Design Method (Dillman, 2000). A total of 309 questionnaires were completed and returned, resulting in a 62% response rate.

Respondents were provided a 25-item instrument that was pilot-tested for face validity with a convenience sample of Ohio township trustees. A panel of experts reviewed the instrument for content validity. All but two of the 25 items were of a fixed-choice design. The following items are the focus of this article:

1. What is your knowledge level of zoning, comprehensive planning, and subdivision regulations?
2. Have you had any land use planning training in the last two years?
3. From what source(s) do you prefer to learn about land use planning?
4. Are you familiar with OSU Extension Land Use Education programs?

Results/Discussion

Respondent gender, age, educational attainment, political orientation, and township location data were acquired. Township location data enabled us to sort responses by region and Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) status.

Respondents were predominantly politically conservative, white, males, and over 50 years of age. Most had obtained a high school diploma. A higher portion of MSA respondents were women. In addition, MSA respondents tended to be older and more educated. There were 15% more MSA respondents with education beyond high school than non-MSA respondents (Table 1).

Table 1.
Educational Attainment--MSA/Non-MSA

MSA		Non-MSA	
HS Diploma	63%	HS Diploma	78%
Beyond HS	37%	Beyond HS	22%

We used question one to examine respondents' understanding of zoning, subdivision regulations, and comprehensive land use planning. A five-point Likert-type scale was used (5 being "very

knowledgeable" and 1 "not at all knowledgeable").

Zoning appeared to be the best understood tool. More than half (57%) of respondents indicated that zoning was in place in their township. Because township zoning is the land use planning tool most readily available to trustees, it is reasonable to assume that their understanding of this tool is associated with its level of use.

Data also indicated the presence of an association between trustees' understanding of land use planning tools and trustee location. Respondents in MSAs, central, southwestern, and northeastern regions of the state indicated higher levels of understanding than respondents from non-MSAs, and southeastern and northwestern regions. This may be explained by the regional differences in development pressure. That is, respondents indicating higher levels of understanding were located in areas of the state that have recently experienced the greatest degree of development pressure.

We used question two to understand the extent to which this clientele group participates in continuing education related to these land use planning tools.

Only 22% of respondents had participated in continuing education some time in the previous 2 years. When intense or moderate development pressure was perceived, respondents were more likely to have attended training in the past 2 years. This finding appears to be intuitive. That is, the need to better understand development pressure and ways to reduce development pressure provides the impetus for seeking out land use planning training.

We used question three to better understand respondents' training provider preferences.

Perhaps due to familiarity with the organization, roughly 60% of respondents indicated they preferred to learn about these land use tools from the Ohio Township Association (OTA). Forty percent of respondents indicated they preferred to learn from a regional planning commission. Twenty-five percent indicated a preference for OSU Extension educational programming. Extension programming has been part of the OTA meetings, hosted by regional planning commissions, and sponsored by boards of township trustees. Extension has also hosted land use planning conferences and programs.

OSU Extension as a source for learning was preferred by respondents from the northeastern region of Ohio more than from any other region. This may be explained by the presence of a number of Extension educators in the region who have made land use planning education a focus of their county programming.

We used question four to gauge the level of familiarity with Extension's Land Use Programs.

Twenty percent of respondents indicated they were familiar with OSU Extension's Land Use Programs. Respondents in MSAs were more familiar than non-MSA respondents. At first glance, this finding seemed curious. That is, historically our programming efforts have received the most attention from rural township trustees. However, upon further consideration, we recognized that MSA respondents have been experiencing the greatest growth pressure and are more likely to have participated in training. Many of the trainings have been conducted in cooperation with the Ohio Township Association's (OTA) bi-annual conferences and regional planning commission programs.

Implications

Respondents who perceived higher levels of development pressure appeared to possess a better understanding of zoning, subdivision regulations, and comprehensive land use planning than respondents who indicated a perceived lower level of development pressure. By and large, respondents indicating higher levels of development pressure were located in areas of the state that have been experiencing increased growth pressure.

Higher level educational programming and more advanced training with respect to the use of zoning, subdivision regulations, and comprehensive land use planning should be developed and targeted to trustees in such areas that are experiencing the effects of increased development. Moreover, such programming could be targeted to areas of the state that are on the cusp of such increased development pressure. Communities that will most likely begin to experience such pressure in the near future could stand to gain much from becoming more familiar with land use tools such as zoning, subdivision regulations, and comprehensive land use planning prior to the onset of increased development pressure.

Training participation was highest in MSAs and the southwestern region (a region of the state experiencing unprecedented development pressure). Efforts should continue to target audiences in such areas. Furthermore, an opportunity to provide Extension education exists when one considers that less than 22% of respondents statewide indicated they had participated in such training in the past 2 years. In response to the finding, questions arise such as:

1. Is programming offered in an instructional format that is conducive to trustee participation?
2. Is cost of programming an issue?

3. Are programs offered at times that are convenient to potential participants?

Respondents' preferred training providers were the OTA and their local regional planning commission. This is not surprising considering many township trustees are members of such organizations (many of which meet on a monthly basis). Not only do such organizations offer training, they also provide a local context in which the training is framed in an atmosphere of familiarity to township trustees.

Extension has provided training in conjunction with both organizations in the past. Efforts should be made to strengthen the partnership with both organizations to develop collaborative educational efforts that reach a broader range of township officials. Enhancing such partnerships can better enable a concerted effort to reach a greater number of township trustees in Ohio.

Central region respondents were most familiar with OSU Extension's Land Use Programs and were more likely to have requested additional information than respondents in other regions. This may be explained by the intense development activity that central Ohio has experienced in the past 10 years and proximity to the OSU campus based in Columbus, Ohio. Statewide, one in five respondents indicated they were familiar with OSU Extension's Land Use Programs. A coordinated marketing strategy to develop awareness amongst township trustees as well as the agencies that serve them would be helpful.

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